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Foreword

Most of this present issue explores the theme of John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) as historian. Yoder was constantly asking unique questions of historical sources—as he himself acknowledged. He was pressing sources for answers that differed conspicuously from those sought by academic historians. What Yoder had in mind while “doing history” was theological ethics, a term that fairly well represents his over-arching concerns. If we recognize this motivation, we can more accurately assess his work in its original context—and also see more clearly its continuing relevance for ours. Many of Yoder’s questions remain with us today, and are not merely curiosities of one man’s intellectual biography. Articles by Arnold Snyder, Stephen Dintaman, and Hanspeter Jecker deal directly with this theme, while an essay by Paul Heidebrecht takes Yoder into new, uncharted territory. A book review by Paul Doerksen of Yoder’s doctoral studies, recently published in English, completes this part of the issue.

The rest of this issue presents the latest Benjamin Eby Lecture, given by Hildi Froese Tiessen at Conrad Grebel University College in November 2005. This lecture, the eighteenth in the long-running series, may be many readers’ first introduction to Mennonite man-of-letters Ephraim Weber (1870-1956).

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Our Fall 2006 issue will focus on the Lord’s Supper, and will also include a Reflection by Thomas Finger on the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in February 2006 in Brazil. As our issues are becoming filled to overflowing with full-length articles, we are struggling to accommodate in a timely fashion the book reviews that are a traditional and integral part of our publishing agenda. For the time being, we direct readers to our website, where the latest reviews are being posted on an experimental basis. Visit www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview. We are planning to get these same reviews into print as soon as possible. Meanwhile, let us know what you think of the experiment.

C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor* Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

Doing History with Theological Ethics in Mind: John Howard Yoder as Historian of Anabaptism¹

C. Arnold Snyder

It is common to connect the name of John Howard Yoder with “Anabaptism” and to describe his work as “neo-Anabaptist.” This connection is not accidental. Yoder’s ground-breaking theological and ethical contributions were given significant shape by the historical studies in sixteenth-century Anabaptist beginnings he carried out from 1950 to 1957 at the University of Basel.² In 1957 Yoder completed a two-part study of the dialogues between the early Swiss Anabaptists and the Reformed under Professor Ernst Staehelin, the first part of which was accepted as his doctoral dissertation in theology at the University of Basel.³ The second part was a theological analysis of the dialogues, published separately in 1968 in Zürich, Switzerland.⁴ In the foreword to this later work, Yoder notes that this study originated “at the beginning of 1957 as the second, more systematic part of a work on ‘Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland.’”⁵

These early publications – now translated into English in a single volume⁶ – document Yoder’s initial historical research in sixteenth-century Swiss sources and his analysis of biblical, theological, and ethical themes derived from it. Yoder’s doctoral work is a careful study of Reformation events in and around Zürich in the 1520s. It is a piece of historical research and was treated as such by contemporary scholars. As the basis for his later work, Yoder’s historical studies shed unique light on the origin and development of his thought. However, this present article will not attempt to trace that development; it will instead provide an overview of Yoder’s activity as an historian of Anabaptism and will review his historical work in the context of the Anabaptist scholarship that developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Historiographical Setting for Yoder's Initial Study (to 1968)

The historical study Yoder carried out for his doctoral dissertation reflects many of the historiographical outlines of Anabaptist scholarship from the late 1950s and early 1960s. More particularly, there are strong echoes of the North American Mennonite renaissance in Anabaptist studies associated with the names John Horsch, Harold S. Bender, and Robert Friedmann. Though Yoder is at pains to correct points of historical interpretation taken by Bender and other Mennonite scholars, nevertheless his approach to the Anabaptist story and his work as a whole fit comfortably within the mid-century North American Mennonite historical project: rehabilitating the Anabaptists in the face of centuries of hostile Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic historiography. Among European Mennonite scholars, Yoder made common cause with Heinold Fast, whose work on Heinrich Bullinger and intimate knowledge of archival sources for eastern Switzerland become visible from time to time in Yoder's own work.⁷

By the third quarter of the twentieth century, thanks in no small part to the efforts of committed Mennonite scholars, a secure place had been made for Anabaptism within the landscape of Reformation history and, more narrowly, within the scope of the Radical Reformation, which was in itself a new rubric in Reformation studies. By the late 1960s, however, the tone of historical writing in Anabaptist studies began to change from earlier denominational attempts to be taken seriously to more technical historical research on empirical details of the story, undertaken particularly by social and intellectual historians (as opposed to theologians doing historical theology). The shape of Anabaptist historical scholarship had changed dramatically by century's end. Accordingly, one question to be explored in the present article is this: How did Yoder's historical depiction of Anabaptism change in response to the changing and evolving historical paradigms?

At the mid-point of the century, when Yoder was doing his original historical work, the most contentious issue in Anabaptist studies was the question of the origin and essential nature of the baptizing movement. Theories abounded, related to the various denominational and intellectual commitments of the authors, but invariably the "origins" of Anabaptism were said to color its essential character. A particularly contentious "origin" was the traditional assignment of a leading role to the insurrectionist theologian Thomas Müntzer, called the "father" of Anabaptism by some scholars in the

Lutheran and Reformed mainstream. This point of origin, so the reasoning went, gave an essentially “revolutionary” shape to Anabaptism that bore its logical fruit with the events at Münster. Origins in late medieval mysticism appealed to less dogmatically motivated scholars, who pointed to the influence of spiritualist Anabaptists such as Hans Denck. And so it went.

A point of concentration for North American Mennonite historical scholarship in the century’s first half was thus the question of Anabaptist origin (emphatically singular) and the “essential” Anabaptist character reflected by that origin and birth. Bender’s doctoral study confirmed that the first baptizers in sixteenth-century Europe emerged as erstwhile followers of Ulrich Zwingli: Zürich was the true “birthplace” of the “genuine” Anabaptist movement and Conrad Grebel was its father.⁸ As Bender later articulated in his famous “Anabaptist Vision” statement, the fundamental teachings of genuine Anabaptism were “a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance.”⁹ Discredited were theories about Anabaptists springing up as continuations of Erasmian humanism, fanatical heresy, “pious heretical groups,” apocalyptic visionaries, or late medieval movements. Pushed to the margins of the movement were adult baptizers who had deviated from the “genuine Anabaptism” of the Swiss origins. In 1944 Bender could state with assurance that “Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfilment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus . . . a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.”¹⁰

Yoder’s historical project in no way replicated Bender’s but rather took those essential outlines for granted as needing no further essential proof – although his own work did provide independent arguments for Bender’s basic view.¹¹ Yoder’s historical project was characteristically his own, in that he set out to clarify the Reformation roots of Anabaptism through a detailed study of the process of separation between Zwingli and the early Swiss Anabaptists. It was a question that certainly had not been asked in this way before, but it did grow directly out of the historical depiction of Anabaptist origins in Zürich summarized for English readers by Bender’s work. That is, Yoder’s research questions assumed the central importance of Zürich and Zwingli to the story as a whole, and they assumed that the true nature of

Anabaptism would be revealed by a thorough and profound examination of the rupture between the first baptizers in Zürich and Zwingli.¹² He explains in the “Introduction” to his historical study:

An alignment of the Anabaptists with the whole course of the Reformation demands above all that they be seen in their positive and negative relationships to the other streams of the Reformation, and above all that means in relation to the Zwinglian Reformation, which can be considered the only possible birthplace of Anabaptism.”¹³

When Yoder speaks of the origin and the nature of “Anabaptism” in this earliest historical work, he intends the term to be as far-ranging as it sounds: he is speaking of the baptizing movement as a whole. Empirically speaking, however (as he recognized), his research focused only on the early Swiss Anabaptists and, even more narrowly, on the crucial interactions of certain of them with Zwingli and his reform.¹⁴ But since the nature of “true Anabaptism” was born and took shape in Zürich and at Schleithem, a focus on the Zürich events provided the “Anabaptist” template by which all other baptizing movements could comfortably be described and measured.

In order to investigate the Reformation origins of Anabaptism in Zürich, Yoder focused his historical analysis on the conversations, dialogues, and disputations (*Gespräche*) between the Swiss Anabaptists and the Zwinglian reformers. This choice of source material provided a fertile field, comprised as it was of historical documents in which the protagonists debated biblical truth, faithful action, and the shape of a biblical church. These were documents to which biblical, theological, and ethical questions could later be addressed. In the first part of his study, however, Yoder carefully lays the historical groundwork for the systematic theological questions he already anticipated engaging: the thoroughly “Zwinglian” nature of the early Anabaptists,¹⁵ Zwingli’s “turn” from his earlier views,¹⁶ the Anabaptist will to dialogue,¹⁷ and the emergence of an ordered community (Schleithem) capable of sustained existence even in the face of determined political opposition.¹⁸

Based on his study of the dialogues, Yoder concluded that the original Anabaptists stood in no significant causal relationship to peasant unrest or to the social and economic issues of interest and tithes, but were motivated by

scriptural, theological, and ecclesiological questions.¹⁹ Nonresistance was fundamental to Anabaptism from the start because the original Anabaptists refused state resources.²⁰ In the case of Swiss Anabaptists who did not fit the mold being described, who either strongly opposed paying interest and tithes (Pfistermeyer), were not non-resistant (Hubmaier), or demonstrated signs of spiritualistic “enthusiasm” (as in St. Gallen), Yoder says these individual instances are exceptions to the significant and surviving ecclesial unity created at Schleithem.²¹

The Afterword to the historical study fittingly returns to a central theme of mid-century Mennonite historiography – “true Anabaptism” – but now with a different answer than the one provided by Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision.”

. . . the course of our research has established that it is possible to recognize a “true Anabaptism,” with its own pre-history and its own organic development. . . . The Anabaptists who first introduced believers’ baptism, who established ordered church communities, who held out despite persecution; the Anabaptists who repeatedly engaged the reformers in dialogue, show themselves to be a unified group with definite boundaries. . . . those Anabaptists who stood on the foundations of Zürich and Schleithem – although they were almost leaderless and continually exposed to the violent measures of the authorities – survived through the decades. In our opinion, they deserve to be considered the “true Anabaptists. . . .”²²

“True Anabaptism,” then, was the sixteenth-century movement composed of baptizers who developed Reformation insights organically through open dialogue with others, and who established ordered church communities with visible boundaries capable of surviving even in the face of state persecution. This description of “true Anabaptism” provided key ecclesiological norms for Yoder in subsequent historical writing as well as a heuristic tool for sorting through varieties of radical dissent in the sixteenth century in his writings of the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1980s he disavowed the historical search for a “normative” Anabaptism, as will be noted later, although in his theological and ethical work he does disavow the ecclesial and ethical categories that he had originally derived from normative Anabaptism.

Reactions and Counter-reactions (1958 - 1975)

In the years immediately following his dissertation work, Yoder remained active in the field of Anabaptist history, publishing a series of writings drawing from and building on his earlier research.²³ Two of these writings elicited responses from scholars; in a third, Yoder engaged the work of others. In the midst of this activity he also edited and translated source documents for the first volume of the *Classics of the Radical Reformation* series, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*,²⁴ and wrote voluminously in other disciplines as well. The scholarly apparatus in the Sattler translation volume reflects themes and insights first encountered in Yoder's dissertation; the Schleithem Articles feature prominently in the dissertation and the source collection, and occupy a central place in his empirical description of Anabaptism.

The Turning Point of the Zwinglian Reformation

Yoder's dissertation developed the thesis that Zwingli had "turned" from an initial commitment to form an independent (believers') church and accepted instead an alliance with the civil authorities to form a state church. Four years before publishing his dissertation but shortly after completing it, Yoder published "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation" in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1958), which sharply summarized the thesis of Zwingli's "turn" without providing the nuance or detailed documentation of his dissertation.²⁵

It took most of a decade but Yoder's "turning point" thesis generated a full-scale response by the Reformation historian Robert Walton, first in a monograph and then in a concentrated article also published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.²⁶ Walton's central argument was that Zwingli had always thought "theocratically," in terms of a state unified under one church.²⁷ In particular Walton challenged the contention that Zwingli had ever intended a "clean break" from the state for his reformation; rather Zwingli expressed himself in terms of a "gradual transformation within the existing institution."²⁸

Yoder replied the following year in the same journal, with an article that was actually an English translation and adaptation of one chapter in the second *Gespräch* volume that had just been published in German the year before. Along with some adaptations in translating the original wording,

Yoder also inserted several pages of commentary directed to Walton's challenge.²⁹ There it was clarified that the radical "turn" by Zwingli was a mistaken reading of Yoder's original intent. What he had meant was contained in the original German text, namely "how an inner contradiction between two strands of Zwingli's theological personality gradually comes to the surface. One strand is the theocratic, which was always present. . . . The second strand . . . speaks of sharing the sufferings of Christ. . . ."³⁰

With this clarification the sharp edges of the disagreement were blunted, though significant differences remained in the interpretation of certain crucial, ambiguous documents (especially a key letter from Zwingli to Myconius, written in 1520): Zwingli's "turn" was more of a "drift" or a "slide" than a "sudden veering" from a free church to a theocratic position – an "evolution," in short. The basic thesis, Yoder maintained, still remained valid, once appropriate qualifiers were entered.

The Crystallization Point of the Anabaptist Movement

The Schleithem Articles played a central role in Yoder's 1957 historical work on Anabaptist beginnings: at Schleithem the Anabaptist movement received an "order" or "constitution" that allowed it to survive and flourish, with no dependence on civil power. In 1972 Yoder published an article in the *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* that extended the significance of Schleithem by proposing that the Articles represented the "crystallization point" of the movement.³¹ What was new in this thesis was the suggestion that when Michael Sattler had been present in Strasbourg in 1526, in dialogue with Bucer and Capito (documented in an extant letter from Sattler to them), Sattler was harboring the hope that Anabaptism could be implemented in Strasbourg itself, somewhat along the lines of the earlier Waldshut attempt. Only when Bucer and Capito refused to continue the dialogue were Sattler and the Zürich Anabaptists forced to separate from the mainstream reform and create a binding "constitution" for themselves (the Schleithem Articles). They had nowhere else to turn, having now been rejected by all the reformers.

The Schleithem Articles, composed a few months after the Strasbourg episode, thus mark the true beginning of the Anabaptist movement, its "crystallization point," because an "ecumenical point of no return" had been

reached. The final rejection of dialogue by the reformers led to unwilling separation for the Anabaptists. Furthermore, the “false brethren” rejected in the Articles were Bucer, Capito, and other mainline reformers – not the baptizing libertines or spiritualists in St. Gallen or other places.³² At issue here, then, was the question of how early Swiss Anabaptism had become separatist and how Schleithem’s separatism was to be interpreted.

The Reformation historian Klaus Deppermann of Freiburg replied in an article the next year in the same journal.³³ Deppermann could find no evidence that Bucer and Capito had ever thought of Strasbourg in any other terms than a small “corpus Christianum” in which citizens were at the same time church members (i.e., Bucer and Capito never would have seriously entertained the notion of a believers’ church); he saw Sattler’s separatism as fundamental to Sattler’s thought (and not a regrettable result of ecumenical rejection); and finally he suggested that the “false brothers” mentioned at Schleithem were Anabaptist spiritualists, not Bucer and Capito.

This response elicited an exchange of letters between Yoder and Deppermann, published in the same issue of the journal.³⁴ There is no evidence that either Yoder or Deppermann changed their minds as a result of this exchange; Yoder’s basic “crystallization” interpretation of the Strasbourg episode and the nature of the Schleithem Articles can still be read in the critical apparatus of the translation volume *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, also published in 1973 and still in print.³⁵

Reply to ‘Anabaptists and the Sword’

A central conclusion to Yoder’s work on Anabaptist beginnings in Zürich was that the principled nonresistance of the earliest Anabaptists was integrally related to their “free church” ecclesiology, just as Zwingli’s acceptance of state violence in service of the church also irrevocably determined his state-church ecclesiology. Schleithem’s Article VI was the ultimate statement of the Anabaptist position on the sword.³⁶ By 1974 three works had appeared that posed questions about the relationship of nonviolence to the social order.³⁷ In “‘Anabaptists and the Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,”³⁸ Yoder set out to address all three, concentrating most of his attention on James Stayer’s recently-published *Anabaptists and the Sword*. Stayer’s description and analysis was

a significant new addition to Anabaptist scholarship, all the more so for its careful reading and categorizing of Anabaptist sources from all regions of Europe and all manner of baptizers.

At the outset of his review article Yoder stated he had no wish to examine the empirical data that he said, rather surprisingly, “have not been very debatable for a century already.” Rather than debate the data, he would take up the methodological question of “the way in which a prior theological and world view commitment enters into the capacity of the historian to make a meaningful unity out of the data he reads.”³⁹ The classifications of nonresistance utilized by historians, he argued, pre-judge the possibilities of Christian engagement with the state by imposing either a yes or a no answer to the question. He included Stayer’s panoramic study (with its categories such as separatist; apolitical; moderate apolitical; undogmatic nonresistant, etc.) as an example of such a pre-judged methodology. The “definitional dualism” of the historians Yoder reviews skews the data they examine by predetermining the answer – although, according to him, Stayer’s “empirical approach” contains the most fruitful possibilities for “conversation.”⁴⁰

Yoder’s answer to definitional dualism is subtitled “Reading through a less dualist grid.” Yoder lists eight “logically possible positions which can be taken on the question of the sword in the context of reformation debates.” It is the third of these positions that he favors, the one he identifies with Schleithem’s Article VI.

It is possible to hold that two orders of preservation and redemption exist together under the same God. In one of them the sword has no place, due to the normativeness of the work of Jesus Christ, whereas in the other the sword has a limited legitimacy, which is tested precisely at the point of its ability to keep itself within limits. The classic early Anabaptist statement of this position is that of Schleithem VI: “The Sword is an ordering of God outside of the perfection of Christ.”⁴¹

Those who hold this position will be able “to condemn a given action in principle, and yet . . . continue to consider those who persist in that action as Christians, albeit misguided ones, and thereby to continue conversing with them.”⁴² This position is “something new in the history of ideas,” namely

a position that insists that “it should not be” yet “refuses to destroy the adversary or to withdraw from the struggle.”⁴³

The implicit conclusion to be drawn is that Schleithem’s Article VI held the key all along to a new, politically engaged (within the limits of the possible), dialogical, nonviolent manner of structuring Christian relationships that enables fraternal admonition within a believer’s church, ecumenical conversation with other communions, and even “viable democracy.”

Stayer did not publish a reply to Yoder’s review, although in the summer of 1977 he did read a paper in response at a colloquium at which Yoder was present and to which he responded informally.⁴⁴ In that paper Stayer moved the discussion away from “logically possible” positions, and asked whether the historical evidence concerning Sattler and Schleithem actually fit the description assigned to Schleithem by Yoder. He marshaled textual evidence that Sattler repeatedly drove a wedge between the kingdom of Christ and that of Satan (and Sattler clearly placed worldly power in the realm of Satan). Stayer also affirmed the interpretation of Schleithem as a dualist, separatist statement that cemented separation from worldly power by condemning the world’s satanic origin and nature. Schleithem did not leave the door open to constructive engagement with government as a “Christian” entity but rather firmly closed it.⁴⁵ Stayer granted there were Anabaptists who held views close to the one described by Yoder, but suggested that in fact the more flexible, less dogmatic and less separatist position Yoder wished to ascribe to Article VI actually came closest to the views of Hans Denck, the mystical Anabaptist.⁴⁶

In his early dissertation work Yoder had noted that “The questions of whether and how a civil authority should be considered Christian, and whether and how the Christian should participate in state life, belong to theological ethics and not to dogmatic history.”⁴⁷ In replying to Stayer’s empirical study on the sword in Anabaptism in 1974, when he wished to address nonviolent Christian engagement with the state, Yoder constructed a methodological grid that revealed its natural home in theological ethics rather than in empirical historical study. (In fact, Yoder’s scholarship had been developing away from historical studies towards Christian ethics even in 1957.) His engagement with Stayer failed to engage the vast array of sources and the new historical narrative Stayer had marshaled. His encounter with

Stayer's early work on the sword would mark Yoder's last direct published engagement with Reformation scholars working in Anabaptist history.

The methodological divide now visible grew wider almost immediately. Not only was Yoder strongly drawn in other directions – *The Politics of Jesus* had been published in 1972 and had been preceded by *The Christian Witness to the State* (1964), *Nevertheless* (1971), and *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (1971) – but the field of Anabaptist history was undergoing a major methodological shift that brought to the forefront wide empirical research on the social, economic, and political contexts in which Anabaptism found expression. The historiographical details will not concern us here, but two publications indicate the depth and significance of the methodological change now underway.

In 1975 James Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann published “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis.” This ground-breaking article announced a new approach to Anabaptist history based on detailed empirical studies of particular regions and persons, and drew new conclusions as a result.⁴⁸ The historical question no longer was “What was the *place* of origin of Anabaptism?” but rather “What were the *places* where Anabaptism originated”; no longer was it “Who was the intellectual *father* of Anabaptism who determined its essential character as a movement?” but “Who were the intellectual *fathers* of Anabaptism who determined the varieties of Anabaptism?” One was to think no longer of a “normative Anabaptism” but of “Anabaptisms,” all with unique origins and characteristics, and none of them normative.

Needless to say, Yoder's early concentration on Zürich and Zwingli and the assumption that from this study the essential marks of “true Anabaptism” could be identified ran counter to the method and results of the polygenesis historians and, increasingly, those of other historians working in the field, most of whom had no denominational connections with the believers church tradition.⁴⁹ One need only reference Yoder's conclusions in 1957 to see that the historiographical gulf was widening quickly.⁵⁰

The methodological exclamation point of this development was contained in the papers of a symposium of scholars discussing “Problems of Anabaptist History,” published in 1979 in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. The keynote essay by Hans-Jürgen Goertz, titled “History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today,” celebrated what he saw as the

demise of confessional history at the hands of the Marxist historian Gerhard Zschäbitz, the social historian Claus-Peter Clasen, and the intellectual historian James Stayer.

It would appear at first glance that the work of Zschäbitz, Clasen and Stayer has negated the cherished conclusions of the free-church historiography on virtually all points: the nonrevolutionary character of Anabaptism, its clearly voluntaristic ecclesiology, its essential unity, and its significance for the emergence of the modern world.⁵¹

There is a place for theology in the study of church history, Goertz conceded eventually, but it must be subservient to history, methodologically speaking, and good history is independent of theological commitments.

The theologian can perhaps draw attention from his distinctive perspective to problems which no one else would have noticed, but he must do this in such a manner that his results can be examined by everyone on the basis of historical material. That very fact bars the way to a hermeneutical primacy of theology in the study of church history.⁵²

Thus the “cooperative participation” of theologians and historians in the investigation of Anabaptism can and should happen, Goertz concluded — but with appropriate methodological limitations on the side of the theologians.

Other participants in the symposium did not entirely echo Goertz’s views. Stayer, for example, said that Goertz seemed to be calling for the “abject surrender” of church historians who had “distinctive religious viewpoints.” He concluded, “I doubt if such a surrender will take place and, in fact, I hope it does not.”⁵³ Nevertheless, work in Anabaptist history in the last quarter of the century was strongly colored by the approach not only recommended by Goertz but already well underway as the dominant methodology.

The methodological sea change did not create the kind of environment hospitable to the approach Yoder had taken and continued to develop, and his stronger interests lay in other fields in any case. Although the pioneering “Polygenesis” article appeared in 1975, only seven years after the publication of Yoder’s second volume of the Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues, Yoder did not engage polygenesis historical scholarship even once in print — although

he did modify his own teaching narratives in light of the new scholarship, as will be noted below. However, this lack of direct engagement with the subsequent scholarship—coming from a renowned debater, prolific writer, and brilliant scholar who did his doctoral work in Anabaptist history—speaks volumes.

Yoder's answer to polygenesis historiography was perhaps written before there even was such a historiography. In 1962 in the penultimate footnote to his first published volume on the Anabaptists and Reformers in Switzerland, Yoder wrote: "By pointing to the deep unity of all surviving Anabaptist groups, we are not claiming that they were all under one organizational roof."

There were also visible differences, for example, in their teachings on the incarnation, in the sharpness of their practice of the ban, and regarding community of goods. . . . *But this was not our topic.* These other streams may have helped to form the ethics and the anthropology of Anabaptism, but they do not explain baptism and the community-building power of the Anabaptist message. They influenced the outer form of Anabaptism, but we have Zürich to thank for an Anabaptism that endured.⁵⁴

"The Anabaptism that endured" became a polestar for all of Yoder's historical work. From the start, the questions he was asking led him to seek the essential theological unity of the Anabaptist movement (which he sought and found in Zürich); that the "essential Anabaptism" had been appropriately identified was "proven" historically by the survival of communities that embraced the principles he had identified in the first Swiss Anabaptists. When Yoder extrapolated and "logically" extended the theological, ecclesiological, and ethical significance of the Anabaptist responses beyond what the Swiss Anabaptists actually said (as he explicitly does in the more systematic part of his doctoral work – part II of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*), this is not a betrayal of his methodology but a faithful carrying out of it and his privileged questions. This was a fact perhaps understood but not appreciated by his historian critics.

Yoder's earliest studies reveal history being done with theological ethics in mind, as the choice of source material reveals. The dialogues, after

all, were historical debates about biblical truth. Debate over such questions, Yoder believed, should continue to be the focus for committed church historians and for the ecumenical discussions emerging in earnest at the time of his research and writing. He felt the ecumenical task was primary. For a Christian scholar to fail to direct questions of biblical truth to historical sources that documented the “breaking points” leading to Christian division would be irresponsible; it would be treating history as an “idle academic recreation.”⁵⁵ Such idle recreation could not have been farther from Yoder’s approach to the historical material.

Nevertheless, Yoder would still work in the historical idiom from time to time, as we will note below. But in what would be an amazingly prolific publishing career, his historical work would occupy less and less space. He never again published the results of concentrated sixteenth-century archival and primary source work, although in 1957 he had projected an extension of his Zürich research into Strasbourg.⁵⁶ Such a study was never published; perhaps the “crystallization point” article was part of such a study, begun but not completed.

Radical Reformation Typology and Anabaptism (1974 and beyond)

Although Yoder withdrew after 1974 from direct published engagement with academic historians doing research in Anabaptism, he did not abandon historical writing altogether.⁵⁷ The audiences for which he composed overviews of sixteenth-century dissent were primarily students and scholars involved in church settings;⁵⁸ his post-1974 historical writing was for interaction primarily with those working in a Christian context and with theological interests and commitments.

As early as 1957 Yoder was well aware of the great variety of sixteenth-century Anabaptist views. The crucial questions in terms of historical narrative were not the bare fact of diversity but how that diversity would be described and how differing views and actions would be explained. When he dealt with the wider panorama of Reformation dissent (both Anabaptist and non-Anabaptist), he mirrored the typological “Radical Reformation” rubric of George H. Williams⁵⁹ and the similar “Left Wing of the Reformation” framework of Heinold Fast.⁶⁰ Already in 1957 Williams’ typology of radical reforming positions had made a comfortable place for “evangelical

Anabaptists” within a wider, very diverse radical stream that included Karlstadt, Müntzer, Hut, Mathijs, and radical dissidents of all sorts.

In a 1964 lecture (published in 1971), Yoder presented an abbreviated but revealing historiographical survey to assess the significance of the “recovery of the Anabaptist Vision”⁶¹ for a lecture audience comprising participants in a Students Services Summer Seminar at Elkhart, Indiana (not Reformation scholars). Making the point that the earlier hostile collective label of “fanatics” or “enthusiasts” (*Schwärmer*) had been superseded by European and North American scholarship, and that a wide diversity of Reformation dissent was now recognized, he listed twelve divisions among Reformation dissidents, which were then grouped according to four major types: Non-Anabaptist dissenters (e.g., Karlstadt, Müntzer), Fanatics (properly speaking), Anabaptists (“mainstream” Anabaptists), and Antitrinitarians. The general approach in this early lecture mirrors that of Williams, even if the categories do not correspond exactly.

Among the “mainstream Anabaptists,” the group with which Yoder was primarily concerned, were included the Swiss Brethren, Menno Simons, the “strong individual Anabaptists” (Denck, Hubmaier, Hut), the Hutterian Brethren, and Pilgram Marpeck. Yoder found an “enormous breadth of agreement between them,” and further subdivided the mainstream into the surviving groups of Mennonites, Swiss Brethren, and Hutterian Brethren.⁶² The identifying marks of this mainstream Anabaptism were noted (with nuanced comment) as being the four primary marks of mainstream Anabaptist ecclesiology: a church that is visible, missionary, a brotherhood, and led by the Word and the Spirit.⁶³ Yoder concluded with an analysis of the “contemporary significance” of the Anabaptist Vision for the renewal of the Mennonite church.

A more thorough and nuanced description of the broader sixteenth-century “radical” scene was published in 1976 with a collection of Radical Reformation source documents, edited and introduced by Yoder, and published in Spanish in Argentina in a politically charged atmosphere.⁶⁴ *Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical* was a reader based on the English collection of George H. Williams and Angel Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, and the parallel collection of Heinold Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*. In the general introduction Yoder explains that he favors the

term “Radical Reformation” as a descriptive label for sixteenth-century dissent because of the applicability of the double sense of the term “radical.” The dissenters were not only intent on “returning to the roots,” they also meant to renew the church in keeping with its apostolic roots.⁶⁵

In spite of the acceptance of William’s basic typology and Radical Reformation rubric, the historical narrative introducing this volume is an unusual combination of the panoramic, inclusive description of all manner of radical reform, as pioneered by Williams, and interpolations that recall the descriptions of “true Anabaptism” sounded by Yoder in 1957. The Latin American context for which the introduction was written may have led Yoder to shape the text in unusual ways.

After a brief outline of four stages of early Reformation chronology that identifies the emergence of radical reform in the period 1520-21, the first of two historiographical outlines follows. The historiographical survey, however, concerns only the origin and nature of Anabaptism rather than that of the wider “radical reform” and concludes with a narrative firmly rooted in Yoder’s 1957 conclusions.

Today there is no longer any doubt that, in the strict sense, Anabaptism began in Zürich in 1525, in the very heart of the Zwinglian reform. It was led by disciples and collaborators of Zwingli who were disappointed by the slow pace of his official reform. . . . these “radical Zwinglians” respected Thomas Müntzer because of his honest forthrightness [*franqueza*] but they were not in agreement with him on essential liturgical and political points.

If Anabaptism was defined by such a Zwinglian stamp, how is the wide variety of baptizing dissent to be explained?

. . . in spite of being purely Zwinglian in its origins, Anabaptism could very easily and quickly integrate people from very diverse origins, thanks to its non-official nature, its lack of juridical bases and its clandestine situation. These diverse people included little remnant groups of third-order Franciscans, Waldensians and Moravian Brethren; mystical thinkers and ‘enthusiasts’ ready to give themselves to any ecstatic current. Many of these people formally joined the baptizing movement for a time.⁶⁶

The Radical Reformation/Anabaptist narrative begins with dissent from Luther but quickly passes through Zürich to emerge as Anabaptism, which subsequently gathers up “non-Anabaptist” elements for a time. These elements do not last and are not significant to the story, as is shown by the application of the heuristic principle of “true Anabaptism” (not named as such here) that includes only those baptizers who founded visible, permanent groups capable of surviving in the absence of political support.

However, the introduction turns from a description of Anabaptism back to a description of five common characteristics of “Radical Reform” in all of its inclusiveness:

1. A rejection of alliances with civil power (Thomas Müntzer is noted as an exception).
2. Acceptance of suffering at the hands of those with power (Anabaptists like the Münsterites, who inflicted suffering, are not mentioned).
3. Authenticity of personal faith, personal experience, and personal commitment.
4. A visible community, distinct from society in general (the Spiritualists are not noted as exceptions here).
5. A universal vision for mission (separatist groups are not mentioned).⁶⁷

Yoder suggests this radical Christian expression is particularly relevant for an Iberian culture “whose medieval Catholic era lasted until yesterday.” Within the limits of historical models, a Christocentric Protestantism that was free, voluntary, missionary, communitarian, and capable of surviving and changing the world might well have something to say to the contemporary Latin American situation.⁶⁸

Throughout this introduction, Yoder moves effortlessly between panoramic descriptions including all varieties of Reformation radicals to descriptions purporting to describe all radicals but bringing to mind the “true Anabaptists” of Zürich as in the description of Christocentric Protestantism above. But not all the radicals included under Williams’ rubric can be matched with the listed “common characteristics” of radical reform. A profile of Thomas Müntzer, so beloved by the Marxist historiography of that era and a figure of considerable interest to liberation theologians of that time in Latin

America, would have elicited very different “radical” characteristics. Indeed, given the charged political and religious context for which this material was written, it surely was not accidental that in the “analytical essay” that follows careful attention is given both to the sixteenth-century “revolutionary” option (attractive to liberation theologians) and the spiritualist option (attractive to the growing Protestant Pentecostal movements). A third option was what Yoder now called “ecclesial Anabaptism” (rather than the earlier “mainstream Anabaptism” or “true Anabaptism”) that grew out of radical Zwinglianism.⁶⁹

The general introduction then moved to a relatively thorough description of the broader panorama of reformation dissent, at times echoing Williams’ categories,⁷⁰ with occasional narrative hints to contemporary Latin Americans as to how best to make value choices among the options. Stronger conclusions came in an appendix⁷¹ that begins with a second, more detailed survey of “sixteenth-century radical reform,” listing five historiographical stages:

1. Official Protestant historiography.
2. In-group historiography (Mennonite: *Martyrs Mirror*).
3. Scientific revision (U. Heberle and C. A. Cornelius, whose work led to “a corrected understanding of the basic facts that has not changed.”).
4. Mennonite and Believers’ Church historians (Horsch, Bender, who change little regarding the basic facts).
5. Ernst Bloch and neo-Marxist historiography, who favor Müntzer but ignore religious elements and groups like the Anabaptists.⁷²

Under the third period, which Yoder considered the most important for establishing the “basic facts,” there is a further summary of thirteen different strands of radicalism that closely parallels but does not exactly match the list provided in the 1964 lecture noted above. After Müntzer, the Peasants’ War, and Karlstadt comes “Anabaptism proper” [*el Anabaptismo propiamente dicho*] described according to the pattern seen elsewhere for “mainline Anabaptism.” Not included in Anabaptism proper are Hubmaier, Denck, Hut, the Stäbler, Hoffman, Mathijs, or the Antitrinitarians. After Münster, the Melchiorite inheritance in the Netherlands was rejected and the northern

baptizing movement regrouped under Menno Simons. Yoder concludes,

In this way we may sum up the results of a century of research in the manner of Heberle and Cornelius, which culminated with the publication of the *Täuferakten* document series and with the work of other scholars like Fritz Blanke, Franklin H. Littell and George H. Williams.⁷³

Having presented again a wide panorama of radical persons and movements, refracted this time through a more explicitly “ecclesial Anabaptist” lens, the historiographical appendix concludes with a key section subtitled “the Theological Contribution.”

Anyone attempting to interpret the broad range of the radical reform has to begin by noting its extreme diversity, Yoder notes. Nevertheless, “insofar as we are dealing with a movement, we must distinguish between organized communities capable of surviving, and radical individuals who are alone and without followers.” According to this criterion, the unsavory Radical Reformation brew is distilled down to three movements of the same type: the Mennonites, the Swiss Brethren, and the Hutterian Brethren. These groups have a distinctive theological contribution to make, in contrast to the mainline reform.

1. They form particular and visible communities which are voluntary, in which economic goods are shared. It is a missionary community that is organized locally according to the “Rule of Christ” (Matthew 18:15ff.).
2. These groups have a distinctive biblical hermeneutic, marked by a Christocentric Reformation biblicism, an historical view of the Bible, a congregational and critical hermeneutic, open to new insights.
3. These groups renounce political power in support of the church, and maintain the freedom of the church in the face of the state. Conversely, they maintain the freedom of the state in face of the church, and call for liberation from violence.

Yoder concludes by noting that although only some of these Anabaptist marks have been universally accepted in the modern world, “at least we cannot doubt the relevance of their history, their critique and their testimony of word and blood.”⁷⁴ In the end, when theological meaning and significance

needed to be extracted from the diverse history of Radical Reform, the only groups who provided a “distinctive theological contribution” were groups who fit the mold of the “true Anabaptists.”

The two writings surveyed above were drafted before the appearance of the influential revisionist (“polygenesis”) article by Stayer, Packull, and Deppermann in 1975 discussed earlier. Consequently, they continue to reflect the historiographical approach that appealed to “normative Anabaptism.” Although no evidence exists of a direct response published by Yoder to the polygenesis thesis, a collection of lectures delivered at the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana (last edited and published in 1983) indicates that he was abreast of the emerging historiography and significantly modified his narrative of Anabaptist beginnings and diversity in his teaching of seminary students, in response to the new findings.⁷⁵

The seminary course “Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution” dealt with the Anabaptists in one chapter, and although that chapter’s focus was nonviolence in Anabaptism, a narrative of Anabaptist beginnings and development was included of necessity.⁷⁶ Notice that Yoder was working with a modified narrative model comes early in the material: “The Anabaptist movement of the 1520s was not a unity. The historian can’t talk about a unified Anabaptist position until after 1540, and then only on certain questions, and only because people representing the other options were persecuted out of existence.”⁷⁷

Far from speaking of “true Anabaptism,” Yoder now accepts a broader historical definition as urged by the revisionist historians.

An Anabaptist is someone who doesn’t baptize babies and does baptize adults. . . . So there were nonpacifist Anabaptists who were genuine Anabaptists, in the sense that they were baptized. . . . If water baptism received by an adult is the mark then there were obviously violent Anabaptists.⁷⁸

The far-reaching implications of this broad definition are also accepted, including a questioning of the earlier heuristic measure of the “survival” of a given group as a measure of true Anabaptism.

There is no point in saying that one of these groups was legitimately Anabaptist and another wasn’t, since there is no

other criterion [other than adult baptism] for the legitimacy of an Anabaptist. It is possible to say that the Swiss Brethren movement had one kind of coherence. The Hutterite movement had another kind of coherence. The Frisian Mennonite movement had another kind of coherence. Those three movements went on in time long enough that we can make of their coherence a standard, a 'type,' and say (after the fact) that other groups didn't fit that type. We can also record the fact that no other groups survived beyond roughly 1540. Those who survived had come to relatively similar positions on the sword. Yet that measure of survival is of course a different criterion from whether they were Anabaptists in the first place, or from whatever standards we might use to decide whether we would like these Anabaptists better than those.⁷⁹

In light of Yoder's earlier historical writings these were significant concessions and modifications, demonstrating a real evolution in his conception of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.⁸⁰ Of course, very many of Yoder's earlier distinctive emphases remain in this lecture on nonviolence and the Anabaptist tradition, as one would expect, but the historical narrative has shifted in substantial ways.⁸¹

Conclusion

By what measures can we assess John Howard Yoder's work as an historian of Anabaptism? First, the quality and thoroughness of Yoder's investigation into his chosen array of sources (the dialogues) cannot be disputed. Those who have wished to disagree with Yoder on the basis of alternative readings of these particular sources have faced the daunting task of replicating his original, painstakingly careful study in order to find fault with it. Nevertheless, significant challenges to Yoder's historical work did appear, especially those arising in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as outlined above.

Even a superficial intellectual biography of Yoder cannot help but note his uncanny ability to analyze data of all kinds and to find logical patterns of meaning where others could not. When he looked at any field of data, including empirical historical records, it seemed inevitable that the search for larger patterns of meaning was set in motion. The results

usually were breathtakingly insightful, cutting across academic disciplines with brilliant abandon. Nevertheless, in the case of the discipline of history, for those academics whose task it remained to sift through original records and construct historical narratives, Yoder's interpretive grids often were not convincing. In spite of his careful work with the sources of Anabaptist beginnings in Switzerland, his methodology of choice for describing Anabaptism was historical theology in search of the "essence" of the movement; his manner of locating Anabaptism's place in the wider field of Reformation history tended to the typological (also, essentialist) rather than to a descriptive historical narration that was highly empirical. This is not to say that either historical theology or typology are divorced from empirical evidence, but to say that these approaches rather quickly smooth over the rough edges and exceptions that closer adherence to empirical evidence invariably highlights.

It is strange but true that critiques of specific parts of Yoder's early historical investigations leave his work as a whole unchallenged. This is because as a church historian committed to church renewal and ecumenical dialogue, he was pressing the historical sources with theological, biblical, and ethical questions in mind: What does the Bible demand of us as Christians? How should the faithful church be ordered and constituted? How should the faithful church relate to the state? Questions such as these not only were not asked but increasingly were ruled out of order by academic Reformation historians. All the same, as his seminary lectures reveal, Yoder continued to learn from the revisionist historians and made some important modifications to his own historical narratives as a result.

When we read Yoder's original historical work, it is as if the Swiss Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues provided the door through which he could pass, allowing him to explore the larger questions that gripped him and stimulated his creative mind. The door as such—the historical work in its own right—certainly mattered to him, but finally it mattered far less than the wide panorama revealed after he had passed through that door and looked beyond. Professional historians may have wished (and may still wish) to argue about the size, shape, or location of this or that Anabaptist door—and even about the size and shape of the Anabaptist edifice itself—but all this ultimately had minimal impact on the systematic questions Yoder intended to ask. To borrow a phrase he used frequently in debate, he was "asking a

different question” than were academic historians in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The foundational questions driving Yoder’s historical study become the consistent focus of his later systematic work, as Neal Blough has noted: How can the church be church if there is no possibility of true dialogue? Who held the *more adequate position* in the debates between Swiss Anabaptists and Reformed, in light of the Bible? How did each side understand what it meant to be a Christian community? What model of church was *more faithful* to Scripture? Historically considered, did the Zwinglian or the Anabaptist attempts to be church in the world achieve the *more faithful result* after four hundred years?⁸² These questions were matters of engaged faith commitment, as Yoder’s subsequent career clearly demonstrated.

The methodological debate continues over how the history of Christian movements should best be approached and written, in light of the various ideological and religious commitments of the historians doing the work. As for the study of sixteenth-century reforming movements, the pendulum seems to be swinging away from concentration on social, economic, and political causation, to taking more seriously again the religious commitments of the actors as providing valid “historical” reasons for their actions.⁸³ The academic environment has become friendlier now (perhaps temporarily) to the kinds of historical questions Yoder posed almost fifty years ago and to his way of approaching them.

Nevertheless, “using” history to speak to contemporary situations – which all historians do to varying degrees when they construct narratives – continues to pose the same difficult questions it always has. Yoder’s evolving relationship with the changing discipline of radical Reformation history is partly a story of changing disciplinary canons to which Yoder refused to be bound. But more significantly in the light of the broader sweep of his intellectual biography, the story of his relationship to sixteenth-century historical study demonstrates the power of the historical past to stimulate and inform ground-breaking contemporary analysis and debate—in the hands of someone with unique intellectual gifts. Although Yoder withdrew from the field of Anabaptist history as such, it is manifestly true that his historical work “helped twentieth-century theologians to take seriously the theology of Anabaptism.”⁸⁴

Notes

¹ This article is an edited version of the previously-published “Editor’s Preface” to John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004).

² “One could argue that John Howard Yoder’s entire academic career was committed to communicating in broadly Christian terms what he learned through his studies of sixteenth-century Anabaptism in the 1950s in Europe. It was through those studies that he came to the central convictions that he would subsequently spend a lifetime articulating.” Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 31. For an overview of Yoder’s Basel studies, see *ibid.*, 18, nn. 69, 70. Also Neal Blough, “The Historical Roots of John Howard Yoder’s Theology,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, xli-lx.

³ It was due to be published in 1959 but was delayed until 1962. John H. Yoder, *Täuferertum und Reformation in der Schweiz, I. Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538* (Karlsruhe: Mennonitischen Geschichtsverein, 1962). The delay is said to have been the result of “difficulties in printing and technical redaction,” 7.

⁴ John H. Yoder, *Täuferertum und Reformation im Gespräch* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968).

⁵ The tight links between the two publications are further revealed in the copious cross-referencing between the two works: anticipations of later, more systematic treatment are noted in the first volume, and in the second, there are numerous pointers back to the historical work already done in the first.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*.

⁷ See Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997), where the subject matter of published and unpublished writings provides a barometer of Yoder’s shifting scholarly interests. For a review in English of Yoder’s historical work see Mark Thiessen Nation, “The Ecumenical Patience and Vocation of John Howard Yoder: A Study in Theological Ethics,” PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, June 2000, chapter 2 and *idem*, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*. For a brief but incisive review of Yoder’s historical work (in German), see Hanspeter Jecker, “Annex: John H. Yoders Beitrag zur Erforschung der Täufergeschichte,” in Hanspeter Jecker, ed. *Jesus folgen in einer pluralistischen Welt: Impulse aus der Arbeit John Howard Yoders* (Weisenheim am Berg: Agape Verlag, 2001), 157-66.

⁸ The original doctoral dissertation, completed and submitted in 1935 to the University of Heidelberg, was published later as Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel, c. 1498-1526, the Founder of the Swiss Brethren sometimes called Anabaptists* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

⁹ Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ Harold Bender was Yoder’s teacher and inspired him to pursue Anabaptist studies. Nation,

John Howard Yoder, 32.

¹² Yoder relied on the European studies by Heberle and Cornelius to confirm the Swiss origins of Anabaptism. Urban Heberle, “Die Anfänge des Anabaptismus in der Schweiz,” *Jahrbuch für deutsche Theologie*, III (1858), volume 2, 225-80; C. A. Cornelius, *Geschichte des Münsterischen Aufbruchs in 3 Büchern* (not completed), 2 volumes (Leipzig, 1855-60).

¹³ Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 1-2.

¹⁴ He argues, for example, that since Balthasar Hubmaier did not participate in the initial debates with Zwingli, he was not part of key dialogical developments experienced by the inner Anabaptist circle. Hubmaier is thus a more marginal figure.

¹⁵ See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, sections 1- 4; the point will be revisited throughout. “Even when [the Anabaptists] separated themselves from [Zwingli] and had to go another way, they could only go in the directions that he had already shown them: discipleship as the formal principle of ethics, the local congregation where valid church action is located, the questioning of infant baptism; all of this they had from Zwingli.” *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶ This is posed as a “formal question” in *ibid.*, 122ff. “In 1520, Zwingli had visualized the church community as a persecuted minority, as sheep among wolves, and had described following after Christ as the way of the cross for the few. At the end of 1523, the church community is no longer a minority, but is so fully identified with the people of Zürich that it cannot occur to Zwingli that the authorities, who indeed do represent the people, are not responsible for church questions. The original concept of the church community must have changed. The Anabaptists had carried it further, made it more precise....” *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷ Dialogue emerged as a key ecclesiological concept for Yoder. This central theme is summarized in *ibid.*, 118-21. The sixteenth-century roots of that emphasis on dialogue can be illustrated by two examples from this early historical work: “Only the Anabaptists, with their rejection of the government’s authority over the church, continued to be present in the Reformed areas as a continuing provocation to bring questions into dialogue.” *Ibid.*, 115. “But even if the continued survival of the Anabaptist communities to the present earns them a claim to be heard ... their right to be heard really stems from their inexhaustible will to dialogue.” *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, section 14. Speaking of the “inner growth” of the Anabaptist movement, Yoder writes, “The final level was achieved at Schleithem in 1527, at which these different questions united in a new understanding of the church community.” *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 130-32.

²⁰ “The nonresistance that remained typical for Anabaptists and Mennonites in the later decades and centuries was not the fruit of some development. It arose neither from exhaustion or embarrassment. From the moment of its birth on, the essence and reason for the existence of Swiss Anabaptism was its rejection of state resources.” *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹ Hubmaier and Pfistermeyer are called “in-between figures” [*Zwischengestalten*] who didn’t fully agree with the Anabaptist view as expressed at Schleithem. As for the St. Gallen enthusiasts, Yoder notes that Schleithem provided the means to reject libertinism. *Ibid.*, 133.

²² *Ibid.*, 135-36.

²³ Some of the most important of these writings are: “The Turning Point in the Zwinglian

Reformation,” *MQR* 32 (April 1958): 128-40; “Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism,” *MQR* 33 (Jan. 1959): 5-17; “The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists,” *MQR* 41 (Oct. 1967): 291-308; “The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* 43 (Jan. 1969): 95-122; “Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24 (1972): 35-47; “‘Anabaptists and Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2 (1974): 126-39. See Nation, *Comprehensive Bibliography*, for an exhaustive list. Jecker, “Annex” (in this issue of *CGR*) lists 56 of Yoder’s most important historical writings, ranging from book reviews to books.

²⁴ (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973).

²⁵ In this article Yoder argues that Zwingli and Grebel were still in accord in October 1523 (a date at which other scholars had noted a rift between them), and that Zwingli’s “turn” came in December 1523, necessitating Grebel’s opposition. “By thus seeing the basic nature of Zwingli’s shift in position we have at the same time found the crux of Grebel’s clash with him.” Yoder, “The Turning Point,” 140.

²⁶ Robert Walton, “Was There a Turning Point of the Zwinglian Reformation?,” *MQR* 42 (Jan. 1968): 45-56, based on Walton’s monograph *Zwingli’s Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). An abridged version of this printed debate is found in James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull, trans. and eds., *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer*, (Dubuque, IA; Toronto: Kendall/Hunt, 1980) 61-71. Hans Hillerbrand also published a brief critique: “The ‘Turning Point’ of the Zwinglian Reformation: Review and Discussion,” *MQR* 39 (Oct. 1965): 310-11.

²⁷ “There is ample evidence from Zwingli’s later career that he thought of Zürich as a unified Christian community.” Walton, “Was There a Turning Point?,” 50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51. Walton concludes: “Yoder does Zwingli less than justice when he claims that Zwingli abandoned the church to assure unity in society. As Zwingli understood the problem church and society were one; to maintain the unity of the commonwealth was to defend the church.” *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ John H. Yoder, “The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* 43 (Jan. 1969): 95-122. The material added to the dissertation original text is found from the first full paragraph of the *MQR* article, page 108 to the second full paragraph on page 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109-10. “If one looks back over the development that took place from October 1522 to the Summer of 1525, one does not get the impression of a ‘turning’ but more of an almost unconscious slide.” *Ibid.*, 113.

³¹ “Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24 (1972): 35-47.

³² In his dissertation, Yoder suggests that the Schleithem criticism of the “false brothers” could have been a reference to the Appenzell “libertine” disturbances, as well as the kind of “carnal freedom” implied by not breaking with Constantinian Christendom. See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 70. In 1971 in a general overview of reformation dissenters, Yoder appears to attribute the Schleithem meeting to “radicals of Eastern Switzerland”: “It was probably the liberty taken by some representatives of this trend which led to the Schleithem meeting with its concentration on responsible church order.” J. H. Yoder, “The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Concern* 18 (July 1971), 10. The *Concern* article was

based on a lecture given in 1964; the “crystallization” thesis thus emerged in the eight-year interval between that time and 1972.

³³ Klaus Deppermann, “Die Strassburger Reformatoren und die Krise des oberdeutschen Täuferturns im Jahre 1527,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 25 (1973): 24-41.

³⁴ “Ein Briefwechsel über die Bedeutung des Schleitheimer Bekenntnisses,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 30 (1973): 42-52. As a young graduate student working on Michael Sattler’s biography, it seemed to me that Deppermann had the stronger empirical arguments. C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 89-95.

³⁵ See Yoder, *Legacy*, 26, note 48, and 27-29 for a restatement of the “crystallization” view. Yoder revisited the matter briefly in “The Burden and the Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism,” in *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace*, ed. Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993; second printing, Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 23-25.

³⁶ “The final level was achieved at Schleitheim in 1527, at which these different questions united in a new understanding of the church community.... The rejection of violence by the sword and the rejection of the oath were not only taken from various New Testament proof texts, but were also theologically supported.... From this base, Anabaptism could defy the state church and finally do away with the fanatics.” Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 130.

³⁷ The three works were Hans Hillerbrand, *Die politische Ethik des Oberdeutschen Täuferturns* (Leiden/Köln, 1962), summarized as “The Anabaptist View of the State,” *MQR* 32 (April 1958): 83ff; Clarence Bauman, *Gewaltlosigkeit im Täuferturn* (Leiden, 1968); James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado, 1972).

³⁸ “‘Anabaptists and Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2 (1974): 126-39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 126-27. Taking this tack is to assume a position on the slippery slope of historical debate, of course, because those criticizing the methodological pre-dispositions of others open their own methodological pre-dispositions to the same criticism.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130; 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁴ James Stayer, “Anabaptist Nonresistance and the Rewriting of History: On the Changing Historical Reputation of the Schleitheim Articles and the Four Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary of Hans Denck’s ‘Concerning Genuine Love,’” unpublished paper, June 1977. If Yoder composed a written response, it appears not to be extant.

⁴⁵ “Systematic dualism and the conception of Satan as lord of the world are not inventions of Robert Friedmann, they were Sattler’s own ideas.” *Ibid.*, 13. “Although Yoder may have been closer to the meaning of the New Testament in his discussion of the ‘powers,’ Friedmann’s conception of two worlds, one of them ruled (with God’s permission) by Satan, ‘the prince of this world,’ is closer to the meaning of Michael Sattler.” *Ibid.*, 14. My later work on Sattler supported Stayer’s conclusion against Yoder’s: “With the Schleitheim Articles the Anabaptist church becomes the faithful, pure, and separated body of Christ outside which there is no

salvation.” Snyder, *Life and Thought*, 200.

⁴⁶ Stayer, “Anabaptist Nonresistance,” 14.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 265-66.

⁴⁸ James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins,” *MQR* 49 (April 1975): 83-122.

⁴⁹ Besides Stayer, Packull, and Deppermann, one must mention Martin Haas, who worked on social unrest in the Zürich area; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, who worked on Thomas Müntzer and increasingly focused on anticlericalism; Gottfried Seebass, who connected Hans Hut’s South German Anabaptism with Müntzer’s apocalyptic radicalism; Claus-Peter Clasen, who applied a social-historical approach to a huge range of Anabaptist sources; and Calvin Pater, who identified Andreas Karlstadt as the “father” of the Swiss Anabaptists. Since the collapse of the Berlin wall, it is easy to forget that serious and influential work was being done at this time by the Marxist scholars of East Germany, such as Gerhard Zschäbitz.

⁵⁰ See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, §30, “The Zwinglian Origins of Anabaptism.” “Our presentation leaves hardly any room for doubt that the Anabaptists came from Zwingli and can only be understood in Zwinglian terms.... It is no less obvious that the Anabaptists cannot be understood as originating with Luther, either through Karlstadt or through Müntzer.” *Ibid.*, 121-22.

⁵¹ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today,” *MQR* 53 (July 1979): 184.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵³ James Stayer, “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend,” *MQR* 53 (July 1979): 212.

⁵⁴ Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, “Afterword,” note 5; italics mine.

⁵⁵ In an article published in English summarizing his doctoral research findings, Yoder wrote, “If the study of church history is to have a real significance for the Christian church in our day, it must attach especial importance to the analysis of those ‘breaking points’ which have left Christians with a heritage of dividedness in faith and life. It is therefore no idle academic recreation when we seek to ascertain as exactly as possible just how and why this most significant of all ‘breaking points’ within Protestantism [i.e. between Zwingli and the Swiss Anabaptists] came to be reached.” John Howard Yoder, “The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* (April 1958): 128-40; citation from 129.

⁵⁶ See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 162.

⁵⁷ Two publications dealing with Anabaptist history do not form a part of our survey below and should be noted: Yoder contributed the original drafts to chapters 2, 3 and 8 in *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, chapters subsequently edited and revised by Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967). He also collaborated with Wayne Pipkin in the translation volume *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989). The latter volume’s publication date is misleading. Work on the translation had been underway, intermittently, for “a good number of years,” as editor C. J. Dyck noted (page 12).

⁵⁸ For example, “The Believers’ Church Conferences in Historical Perspective,” *MQR* 65 (January 1991): 5-19. That Yoder changed “dialogue partners” is also noted by Jecker: “the audiences and dialogue partners of Yoder’s later work, increasingly and explicitly, are people

both inside and outside a specific Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition who are struggling to be faithful Christians and a faithful church in the modern world. They were interested primarily in *these* issues [of faithfulness], not in the history or theology of Anabaptism.” Jecker, “Annex” in this issue of *CGR*.

⁵⁹ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); typological classifications also in George H. Williams and Angel Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957).

⁶⁰ Heinold Fast, ed., *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation* (Bremen: Schünemann, 1962).

⁶¹ John H. Yoder, “The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Concern* 18 (July 1971), 5-23. A brief survey that follows the same basic narrative pattern, with the specific addition of some individuals from Strasbourg, is “Les Origines de l’Anabaptisme au sein de la Réforme du XVIe siècle,” in Alfred Michiels, *Les Anabaptistes des Vosges* (Molsheim: Editions Jean-Pierre Gyss, 1980), 15-23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14-20.

⁶⁴ *Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical*, John H. Yoder, ed. (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1976).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-12; translated portions from page 12 (translation mine).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁹ The “Analytical Essay” works through six categories: 1. From Luther to the Peasants’ War (including the non-baptizing radicals Strauss, Karlstadt and Müntzer); 2. Radical Zwinglianism (recounting the details of Yoder’s doctoral work, concluding with Schleithem); 3. the Spiritualists (including a very perceptive analysis of the work of the Spirit in radical reform); 4. the “enthusiasts” or fanatics (included here are Hut, Bader, Hoffman, Joris); 5. Ecclesial Anabaptism; 6. Evangelical Humanism.

⁷⁰ For example, the spiritualists are further subdivided into “evangelical,” “rationalist,” and “speculative” types. The “enthusiasts” are further subdivided into “patient” or “suffering” enthusiasts, and “violent” or “revolutionary” enthusiasts. Yoder, unlike Williams, does not utilize the categories of “contemplative Anabaptists” or “revolutionary Anabaptists.” The only Anabaptists listed as such are the “ecclesial Anabaptists.”

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39-47.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39-44.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 43 (translation mine).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46 (translation mine).

⁷⁵ *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Goshen: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), especially chapter 10, “Anabaptists in the Continental Reformation,” 163-200. My thanks to Mark Thiessen Nation for directing me to this specific source.

⁷⁶ “Our interest will then be in the logic of that way in which, as there is concern for greater faithfulness [to Scripture], the problem of the sword arises and moves to the center. We are more interested in the logic of how that happens than in the details of the story. Yet we have to tell some of the story in order to see the logic working.” *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 178-79, *passim*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 191.

⁸⁰ In this lecture Yoder also accepts the existence of “nonseparating congregationalist” Anabaptist villages in the Zürich area, who opposed the payment of tithes and tended toward acceptance of defensive violence. Ibid., 191-92. Hans Hut is not depicted as having “converted” to a full-fledged pacifist position, but rather as holding the sword in abeyance, until the second coming. Ibid., 193. James Stayer is said to be correct in wanting to increase the “variegation with which we read the story. He is also right in working against what he takes to be a kind of apologetic self-protection on the part of Mennonite historians, who affirm the centrality of the Schleithem position without recognizing that it wasn’t typical at the time.” Ibid., 199.

⁸¹ There remains an undeniable emphasis on the Protestant nature of the strand of Anabaptism Yoder privileges in this lecture, with non-Protestant streams entering in from “outside,” particularly those carried by Denck, Hubmaier, and the visionaries. Ibid., 190. After stating appreciation for Stayer’s work on Anabaptists and the Sword, Yoder revisits his earlier critique, arguing that Stayer’s category of “Realpolitik” is anachronistic; he does not speak to Stayer’s critique of his classification of Schleithem as dialogically open rather than separatist in principle. Ibid., 199. In this lecture Schleithem continues to be described as dualistic in a closely nuanced way: “It is the tense missionary dualism representing in the midst of the world a position which the world cannot tolerate.... So this is a pragmatic, biblical, occasionalistic separation.” Ibid., 193.

⁸² See Blough, “The Historical Roots,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, xli-lx.

⁸³ Three recent works that privilege religious factors in sixteenth-century historical narratives are C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995); Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and most recently Andrea Strübind, *Eifriger als Zwingli: Die frühe Täuferbewegung in der Schweiz* (Berlin: Düncker & Humblot, 2003). For a recent and perceptive historiographical review, see John D. Roth, “Recent Currents in the Historiography of the Radical Reformation,” *Church History* 71.3 (September 2002): 523-35.

⁸⁴ Blough, “The Historical Roots,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, lviii.

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JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

**On Flushing the Confessional Rabbit
Out of the Socio-Ecclesial Brushpile**

Stephen Dintaman

Transitions

After teaching and being a pastor in a North American Mennonite context for fifteen years, I am now teaching in a very different setting. I am going through the kind of transitional crisis that teachers experience when they find the questions they have a ready-made stock of answers for are not being asked; and I am also encountering questions for which I don't have answers somewhere on my hard drive. I say that because this paper deals primarily with the impact John Howard Yoder's heritage has had on the Mennonite Church and in particular on its theology of peacemaking. So, if I'm answering questions that no one is asking in this context, I ask your understanding and patience. I should also add a word to those for whom English is not their native language: to "flush" an animal is to drive it out of hiding, usually so it can be killed! But my goal in flushing the confessional rabbit out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile is simply to see it, not to harm it.

Yoder is the pivotal figure in a major transition that has taken place in Mennonite theologies of peacemaking. In the first half of the twentieth century, Mennonite social thinking was dominated by a strictly defined "two kingdoms" theology that can be traced back to the origins of the Swiss Anabaptists. The Schleithem Confession of 1527 polarized the world into the "regenerate" and the "unregenerate," the "children of light" and "the children of darkness." The practice of Christian non-resistance was seen as something possible only within the community of faith. The unregenerate world, however, needed the strong arm of "the sword" to preserve law and order, and God had ordained the State to carry out this role. Mennonite theology interpreted church and world as two different mutually exclusive orders, each with a fixed nature and function. The boundary between them was clearly defined and largely impermeable. This two-kingdom dualism, while it

did not bless state violence, nevertheless accepted that in a fallen world this is the way things were and had to be. It was our business to be faithful disciples of Jesus, not somehow to affect the way the world did its business.

From the beginning of his work and continuing with increasing subtlety and sophistication throughout it, Yoder developed a critique of this reading of the two kingdoms and helped open the way for a more active engagement with the world.¹ Some of the key steps he developed in building a bridge to social engagement with the world are these:

(1) Yoder demonstrated that Jesus taught and called his disciples to practice a new kind of “politics,” a new way of ordering human relationships (as opposed to just inaugurating a purely ‘spiritual’ kingdom). This new politics dealt with the standard issues that all politics must address, such as the nature and use of power, patterns of economic distribution and consumption, self-defense, and how to handle social offenders. That this politics is in a sense like all politics, yet of another order altogether, meant that Jesus’ kingdom is a direct threat and challenge to the kingdoms of Caesar. This is the thrust of Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*.

(2) The church that is faithful to Jesus and takes him as its ethical norm, rather than accepting compromises with “realism” or seeking positions of power from which to shape the social order, is a creative force in the world that can bring about real social change. The church functions as “salt” and “leaven.” Its influence is not just on the people it converts and brings into the Jesus way of life; it also ministers by generating creative new models of community life, ways of dealing with conflict, humanizing enemies, and ministering to the needy. The larger social order, even if it does not recognize the lordship of Jesus, can learn new creative social attitudes, practices, and patterns from the church. But Yoder remained adamant that the church can be a source of social creativity only if it remains faithful to Jesus and remains radically non-conformed to worldly standards of right and justice. Its social and spiritual distinctiveness is the precondition to its “relevance,” not the obstacle to it.

(3) The state and the social order should not be seen as an ontologically fixed, God-ordained institutions but as a form of “ordering” that can evolve and develop patterns for governance, ways of settling conflicts, and ways of dealing with offenders that are less violent and destructive. Yoder is not a

social gospel idealist who thought the world could evolve into the kingdom. But he believed that if Jesus is Lord, if the Redeemer is also the Creator, then there can be times and places in which the way of Jesus contextually modeled by the community of faith could “work” among people who do not necessarily confess Jesus’ name.²

Progressive, socially aware Mennonites eagerly traveled across the bridge that Yoder built and took up the call to apply the way of Jesus to society’s problems. Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus* became the bible of a new activism that took the concrete economic patterns of Jubilee and Jesus’ commitment to absolute nonviolence and made them a kind of canon within the canon for Anabaptist social activism. But having traveled across the bridge and moved from sectarian separatism to world engaging activism, it also became possible to burn the bridge. A strange reality of the current generation of Mennonite social thinkers and peace activists is that while Yoder’s significance is recognized and usually praised, his work, or at least his work beyond *The Politics of Jesus*, is not widely read and discussed. Current social thinking in Mennonite colleges and social service programs is focused primarily on social analysis, a commitment to working at social justice, and highly developed, pioneering programs for teaching and practicing “conflict transformation.” These all make a positive contribution.

What I lament is that these programs are often carried out with little attention to sustained theological reflection. After all, didn’t Yoder teach us that the gospel is a social ethic? And as Anabaptists aren’t we more committed to following Jesus than to metaphysical reflection on theological doctrine? Nonviolent action directed to increasing peace and justice has become a kind of self-authenticating program that hardly needs theological rationales beyond “that’s what Jesus called us to do.”

While Yoder can hardly be blamed for being misread, the very subtlety of his thought lends itself to misunderstanding. In his own masterful way he always correlated confessional language with the concreteness of embodied discipleship. He was suspicious of theologies and theologians who treat theological issues as things-in-themselves that could be abstracted from, and treated prior to, questions of discipleship and ecclesiology. Yoder’s insistence that the gospel is a social ethic, and that Jesus incarnated and calls his followers to incarnate a new politics in the world, is a central theme

throughout his work. The confession that Jesus is Lord lacks integrity and meaning if not made by a community of disciples who in a visible, costly way serve as a sign of the coming kingdom before “a watching world.”³

Yoder had great respect for the work of Robert Friedmann, a late-in-life convert to Anabaptism who, in his major interpretation of the movement, referred to Anabaptists as having “an implicit theology” existentially expressed as discipleship.⁴ Granted that for Yoder the Christian’s confession of faith in Jesus has its habitat in a socially specific peoplehood, what I would like to do in this paper is “flush the confessional rabbit out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile.” I intend to show that the Christian confession of faith in Jesus logically and ontologically precedes social ethics, and is the animating power that gives it coherence and meaning. I am not doing this in order to capture the rabbit and put it in a cage called “systematic theology” or because the rabbit is the “kernel” and Yoder’s socio-ecclesiology is the “husk.” Rather, I am doing this for two reasons. The first is to show that it is a significant misreading to believe Yoder is not serious about the form and content of the Christian confession of faith. To take his social ethic and run with it, without constantly showing how it is grounded in and is only possible and intelligible in the context of confession, seriously distorts his theology *and* his ethic. The second reason is to recall that Yoder is not, and did not claim or intend to be, addressing all aspects of the Christian faith and life in his work. It was motivated by and focused on a particular interest in doing “apologetics” for a certain kind of reading of Jesus and ecclesiology within the context of ecumenical conversation. Yoder’s interests and agenda left gaps and underdeveloped aspects of the faith, and these need to be augmented, balanced, or corrected if his theology is going to adequately serve the community of faith.

Witness, Eschatology, and Doxology

I want to do more than find places where Yoder makes his confession of faith explicit. What is needed is to show that confession is structurally critical to how he thinks about ethics, and that his account of ethics becomes unintelligible if the behaviors he commends are transferred into another frame of reference. Thus I will look briefly at his account of witness, eschatology, and doxology.

Yoder spent a lifetime dealing with the question of the efficacy of nonviolence. Early in his work he tended to accept the formula that “we are called to be faithful, not effective.” Later he regarded this distinction as simplistic and limiting. In a number of essays and culminating in his *Body Politics*, he argues that the faithful Christian community should develop and practice a number of social practices, rooted in the gospel, that can be shared with the social order. Instead of beginning by assuming that “we are called to be faithful, not effective,” we should share these practices with “a watching world” in the hope that it may find something useful and helpful in them.⁵ This is not an attempt to build a Christian social order or the kingdom of God, but simply a gift of grace that the community wants to share. Yoder developed increasing confidence that kingdom patterns of living made sense and were actually the way we were created to be. So we should not *a priori* limit the possibilities for social change and adaptation in the world. Human history has shown many instances in which the efficacy of nonviolence has been demonstrated.

But even though this is a kind of developmental shift in his thought, Yoder never abandoned the ideas that the reason for obedience to Jesus is not its social efficacy or that to be a Christian is to accept the vocation of bearing witness to the coming kingdom of God. In his early work, *The Original Revolution*, he developed the idea of an ethic of “testimony.” Simply put, his rule for action is, how would this act bear witness to God’s redemptive love? This theme of the Christian life as a form of witness to God’s love is the key to Yoder’s reading of Christian ethics and, indeed, to his theological method. Yoder is a post-Kantian theologian who takes up the great questions Kant bequeathed us in epistemology and axiology. Yoder answers both questions with the concept of “witness.” The posture of a witness, one who demonstrates the in-breaking rule of God and invites others to share in it, is the only one he sees as consistent with the servant stance of Jesus. From this position he rejects foundationalist strategies for proving the truth of the faith or for deriving moral rules from universally known absolutes.

While developing an account of how Christian practices are contextually shaped by the hermeneutical community and humbly shared with whomever may benefit from them because they “work,” Yoder makes it clear that within the community of faith deeds are made meaningful because

they “witness.” Perhaps the high point of this understanding of deeds and how they work is expressed in the essay “Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World.” Yoder writes:

‘Sign,’ rather than ‘instrument,’ describes more properly how our words and deeds ‘work.’ We proclaim; our humanizing deeds signify. Others, or rather, Another will determine whether success or sacrifice better represents the Lamb’s lordship. (*For the Nations*, 240)

This emphasis, that deeds are signs rather than instruments, shows they gain their meaning from a reality that is, rather from the results they might achieve. In “Christ, the Hope of the World,” Yoder explains that for us to be in the world as a sign is significant “*Because that is the shape of the work of Christ*”:

When Christians devote themselves to the care of the seriously ill, of the mentally retarded, of the unproductive aged, the fruitfulness of this service cannot be measured by any statistical index of economic efficacy. Whether evaluated from the perspective of the individual or the society, the meaning of this deed is what it signifies, the reality for which it is *the sign*, namely that this person is here to be a servant to his neighbor. His presence and posture, *not* his productivity, are the referent of the sign. (*Royal Priesthood*, 204)

Yoder, while free to consider the utility of deeds, does not believe Christian practices gain their meaning and truthfulness from their consequences. He consistently resists “a kind of creeping utilitarianism” (*Royal Priesthood*, 124). His ethic resists being assimilated and validated within a consequentialist framework for important theological reasons.

First and foremost, Yoder insists that the most fundamental temptation for Christians is not violence but the desire to move history in the way we think it should go. To witness to the Lamb’s victory is to give up this need and desire to engineer the future, and instead to live by faith and hope. This means Yoder cannot be simply classed among that noble group of philosophers, which includes Gandhi, who believe our means should always be consistent with our desired ends. That is, if peace is the goal,

then that end is inconsistent with the use of violent means. Within Yoder's *theological* frame of reference the concept of means and ends does not apply. His comment that "Others, or rather, Another will determine whether success or sacrifice better represents the Lamb's lordship" shows he operates with a strong sense of divine Providence. The way to show that we are indeed creatures and that God is indeed God is to leave the question of results in the hands of God. Even to use nonviolent means to achieve desirable ends is an instance of "a polite form of demagoguery" (*Royal Priesthood*, 158).

Second, Yoder returns in many different settings to discuss what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the irony of history" (human control and predictability are very limited, and campaigns or actions intended to produce certain desirable consequences often achieve something very different from what was intended). An inherent limit in any consequentialist ethic is that "it posits a degree of both actual analysis and ability to predict, to say nothing of ability to control, which are not, in fact, present in any important social conflict. This is not simply a matter of ignorance due to the bluntness of our present tools of observation, analysis, and prediction. . . . Rather it is an intrinsic limitation of the very nature of our self-understanding as social animals. . . ." (*Royal Priesthood*, 124). This case is not just a cause for modesty about how effective we can be but a way of confessing we are witnesses to, not actual agents of, redemption. Yoder really cannot be read as an advocate for developing nonviolent techniques that move history somehow closer to God's reign of justice and peace – though he is often used to justify this approach. Our actions are signs, not instruments.

It might be argued – and is argued by some pacifists – that nonviolent techniques are available or can be found soon that would be successful in defending anything worth defending in any society. Then the feasibility of these techniques and the promise of efficacy is presented as an argument within the prudential frame of reference.... Such an argument, actually basing the rejection of violence on the promise of a better way or proving the relevance of pacifism on the grounds of the lessons of history, would place in the prudential type of reasoning and the historical type of analysis much greater faith than I can do. (*Royal Priesthood*, 216)

Yoder's discussion of witness focuses primarily on deeds pointing toward the coming reign of God. But this is not opposed to verbal proclamation of the gospel. While one would not expect from Yoder a handbook on personal soul winning, he clearly acknowledges the role of the evangelist in a couple of rather remarkable statements. One comes from his early essay, "Peace Without Eschatology?":

Second, there is the call to the individual, including the statesman, to be reconciled with God. This is evangelism in the strict contemporary sense and is a part of the peace witness. Any social-minded concern that does not have this appeal to personal commitment at its heart is either utopian or a polite form of demagoguery. (*Royal Priesthood*, 158)

Another telling comment comes from a much later work, "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men":

We should give thanks for every believer whose personal calling is not to be an agent of direct social change, if that person's genuine calling is to be a face-to-face evangelist, or to discharge any other distinct gift. (*For the Nations*, 235)

To make things more complicated, this emphasis on deeds as witness and signs does not mean it is never legitimate or important to think about results and what works in a given social system and context. Yoder respects the social framework and frame of reference of those who do not confess Jesus. If a given society has been brutalizing and humiliating its social offenders for generations, and the church models a new way of dealing with offenders that honors their humanity and seeks to restore them to human responsibility and dignity, members of that society might at some point say, That seems to work better than the way we've been doing it, let's give it a try. They would adopt these new attitudes and practices because they seem to work better. They produce demonstrably good results that the society can recognize within its own frame of reference and values.

But that utilitarian rationale for adopting more redemptive ways of dealing with offenders is not why the Christian community practices them. That they work better is a secondary property. The Christian practices them because that's how God has dealt with us in Jesus Christ. We share them

with “a watching world” as an act of witness to the gospel of Christ. The society embraces these ways not because it believes Jesus is Lord but because they work better. This sensitivity to multiple and very different systems of validation is a part of Yoder’s subtle analytic genius that is sometimes lost by those whom Peter Dula has called “peace monists.”⁶

Moral validation is derived from the imminent kingdom which Jesus announces, not from the righteous state of affairs our actions promise to bring about. Moral being and behaving are primordially proclamation or celebration. Only derivatively are they debatable positions in value theory or efficacy. (*Royal Priesthood*, 136)

Obviously, this discussion of witness has already anticipated the central role of eschatology in Yoder’s social thought. His gospel is focused on the Lamb’s victory, the triumph over the principalities and powers that Jesus won on the cross. It is this joyous confidence that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the triumph of the kingdom of God is a certainty which defines and energizes Christian discipleship. It is the church’s transcendent hope that ultimately creates and sustains its social creativity. It is hope that enables it to give up control, which Yoder sees as the precondition to real social creativity; that enables it to take risks, empowers it to swim against the stream and maintain its distinctive prophetic voice in the world; and enables it even to accept martyrdom, the ultimate form of inefficacy that in the final analysis is powerful only because it participates in the victory of the Lamb. Yoder’s reading of Christian ethics is false if it is not true that Jesus was raised from the dead and is coming again.

Later in his work Yoder also introduced a theme that both encompasses and surpasses his emphasis on witness: the idea of deeds as “doxology.” One discussion of the role of doxology occurs in the essay “Are You the One Who is to Come?” under the stark sub-heading of “Not Engineering, but Doxology.”⁷ The standard account of moral reasoning in Western thought, Yoder suggests, has been how to get “from here to there.” What is the ideal society we want? What methods can bring it closer? Jesus’ novelty was not that he had a new vision of social goodness or new methods for getting us there, but that he lifted up and celebrated the reign of YHWH over the whole creation. His life and ministry was a celebration and proclamation of what *is*, not a method for getting where we want to be.

It is thus a profound misapprehension of the messianic moral choice to think that in his rejection of violence, Jesus was led by methodological purism in moral choice, choosing to be an absolutist about the sacredness of life. It would be an equally profound misapprehension to think that he was the world's first Gandhian, calculating the prospects for a social victory as being in his particular circumstances greater for nonviolent than for violent tactics. Both of these interpretations of what Jesus was doing as a social strategist follow the "standard account of social ethical discernment" that it is precisely the purpose of all the prophets to free us from. Jesus' acceptance of the cross . . . was not, in the final analysis, a moral decision, but an eschatological one. It was dictated by a different vision of where God is taking the world. Or, we may say it was an ontological decision, dictated by a truer picture of what the world *really is*. (*For the Nations*, 210)

It is this doxological memory of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and the anticipation of his coming reign, that creates the space in which the church can find an alternate consciousness and spirituality that gives rise to an alternate way of living in the world. Yoder is not a theologian who says first, "Get your doctrines intellectually correct," and then, secondarily, "Apply them to living." But he does clearly affirm the ontological priority of doxology (singing the praises of God) to ethics (singing those praises in a contextually relevant political form). When Yoder writes pieces with titles like "Gospel as Social Ethics," one could expect to find a social gospel or liberation theologian who gives ontological priority to action. But in Yoder's reading of the title, the emphasis *and* the content of the ethic is in the word *gospel*.

Yoder's "Skewed" Agenda

I mentioned that Yoder does not seek to address all aspects of the Christian faith and life. His particular mission was to give an account of a distinctive kind of free church ecclesiology often dismissed by establishment churches as sectarian or politically irrelevant. He does this with unmatched subtlety and brilliance. But this focus on the church as an ethic, or as a politic, opens

him to a kind of reductionist reading that simply takes the behaviors of the Christian community and makes them a kind of self-authenticating social program. Yoder himself acknowledges that his interests “skew” his discussions of the faith, as in this statement at the end of his “The Kingdom as Social Ethic” under the sub-heading “Back to True North”:

The imperatives of dialogue with majority mentalities have skewed this description toward the problematics of weakness and effectiveness. An authentic portrayal of “the peace church vision” from the inside would have spoken more of worship and servanthood, reconciliation and creativity, *Gelassenheit* and the Power of the Light, “heartfelt religion” and transforming hope, and the person of Jesus Christ. But if this paper had been thus affirmative then the reader would have wondered why any of that should be “sectarian.” (*Priestly Kingdom*, 101)

This comment is downright revelatory – as though we have emerged from the forest into a sun-drenched clearing. It’s as if the confessional rabbit just came out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile and did a little dance! It could apply to most of Yoder’s published works. An emphasis on apologetics, especially apologetics for a distinctive kind of ecclesiology and ethics, leads Yoder to develop explanatory categories for critical outsiders. The key term in the quotation is in “an authentic portrayal of ‘the peace church vision’ *from the inside*.” Here the stress is not on ethics and how we can best develop strategies for influencing the outside world but on worship, praise, and the person of Jesus.

The problem is that a sub-community within the Mennonite Church has found its identity and reason for being in the socio-ethical apologetics that Yoder developed but has lost its connection to the language of faith. How many social activists talk about “heartfelt religion and transforming hope, and the person of Jesus Christ”? Instead, the canonical language has become Jubilee economics and a commitment to nonviolent means of achieving peace and justice in the world. Divorced from worship and the celebration of salvation, the language of justice and peace takes on a different grammar and meaning. Yoder’s apologetics program assumes there are communities in which the term “the person of Jesus” names an identifiable and active reality, and people who are doing the hard inner work of learning

Gelassenheit. In short, it assumes too much. It is still a Christendom social ecclesiology (defined vis-à-vis Christendom) that assumes that the language and experience of faith is a given, and needs to receive a prophetic ecclesial focus.

Let me illustrate, in perhaps a slightly exaggerated way, how this focusing on apologetics can lead to alienation from the subject matter of faith. In *Body Politics* (pages 14-27), Yoder creatively develops the idea that the Christian sharing of bread at the Lord's table suggests and implies the idea of sharing bread. So, one Christian practice that can be shared with the world is the idea of economic sharing. Good enough. But I can imagine that somewhere down the road we might start hearing sermons suggesting that the reason Jesus broke and shared bread with his disciples was to teach them socialism. At this point the mysterious, distinctively Christian meaning of the event would be lost behind the social practice derived from it.

Yoder clarifies his priorities in a concluding comment at the end of the above quoted section on doxology:

Our angle of entry into the issue would seem to indicate that the latter (knowing *what* God is doing) is prior because it was our question. But certainly the former (*that* God is doing it) is prior. The fact that God is already doing in the world what God plans ultimately to do is certainly prior both in sequential logic and importance to the use we might make of that fact as a source of information and language to provide self-conscious guidance to our sharing in the outgoing process. (*Royal Priesthood*, 126)

That is, it could *appear* that Yoder starts with ethics and what *we* should be doing; but in fact he is beginning with the reality that it is *God* who is doing it. Yoder is thoroughly schooled in the theology of Karl Barth and is certainly aware of the danger of doing apologetics. The danger is that the apologetic reasoning, intended as a secondary kind of explanatory reasoning for those who do not share the language of faith, can instead become the primary form of reasoning that the community of faith uses to explain itself not just to the world but to itself.

Additions, Amendments, and Corrections

Acknowledging that Yoder's agenda and interests "skew" his interpretation of the gospel, it is legitimate and helpful to ask how this imbalance could be supplemented, augmented, and corrected. What themes does Yoder leave underdeveloped?

The Role of Theology

Yoder is primarily a hermeneutical theologian. For him, the community is formed by a constant re-appropriation of the biblical story. He does some very creative work on how the varied gifts of the Spirit function within the community of faith, empowering it to be a contextually sensitive hermeneutical organism.⁸ But he also takes the church's doctrinal traditions with utmost seriousness; never committing himself dogmatically to accept them yet always patiently working to learn from them.⁹ There have been many questions about what kind of theological reflection, or even *if* systematic theological reflection, is compatible with Yoderianism. I suggest that, though for Yoder the primary task of theology is hermeneutics, our discussion above could imply it might also have the task of investigating and clarifying the ontological grounds of the practice of doxology. If the recently emergent model of theological reflection developed by people like James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas is adopted, and theology is seen as reflection on distinctive Christian practices, then perhaps doxology should be seen as a kind of master or defining Christian practice that calls forth theological thought. Making doxology a kind of master defining practice would free theology from an overriding focus on ethics, an emphasis that I believe lends itself to "creeping utilitarianism." It would be fun to begin theology with a question like Why are these people so happy? instead of always starting with Why are these people so good?

If we recognize doxology as a defining practice of the community of faith, then the set of practices we can "offer to a watching world" can be expanded. The practices Yoder develops are political practices which, though grounded in Christian community and its faith, can be shared in the wider world. In addition to these we can also offer joy, hope, healing, and deliverance, and a conviction that life has meaning. Yoder's reading is skewed toward structural aspects of the ordering of human life and

inattentive to the spiritual aspects of human bondage and destructiveness.

Witness is grounded in ontological difference, and it would be a service to the world and to the church for theology to *name* that difference. For the practices of the faith to endure and have meaning they need intellectual self-consciousness—i.e., they need theology. To trust that this ontological difference can be taught and maintained only by participating in a distinctive set of social practices is a fallacy.

The Creative Power of Speech

Yoder is fully aware of the importance and power of language. Speaking of the Holy Spirit's work in building up the church, he writes that "The life blood of that body is language" (*Royal Priesthood*, 139). However, he goes on to say that theologians are like antibodies in the bloodstream! When the body is functioning well they have nothing to do, but when it is threatened by something alien and destructive they go to work. The theologian's task is to guard against the misuse of words. Yoder has a keen sense that new language should be tested: not rejected because it is new or valued because it is old, but tested to see whether it squares with scripture and expresses the faith well in the contemporary context. In "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," he describes theologians as "agents of linguistic self-consciousness" (*Priestly Kingdom*, 32).

Interestingly, in his discussions of the gifts of Spirit and the very radical Pauline charismatic order he sees as the ideal for the church, Yoder stresses that the role of *didaskalos* (teacher) is one with which very few people should be entrusted. But this emphasis on the guardian role of the theologian—the person who watches over the flow of language—assumes there is new language being generated all the time. It assumes there are poets, preachers, evangelists, and catechists who are imaginatively naming the in-breaking reality of the kingdom in ways that convert people and energize the community of faith. Yoder's kind of moral and theological discernment in and of itself cannot create and sustain faith. His focus on deeds as signs of the kingdom should not be stressed at the expense of an equally necessary focus on the power of words to evoke new ways of seeing and being. Deeds (or at least my own) are not so transparent that the world can just look at me and see Jesus. We also need words that name, invite, challenge, and renew faith. Yoder does not help us much with the challenge of developing words

that make faith a possibility. Along with his kind of discernment we need to name the faith explicitly in evangelism, catechism, and worship.

A Place for the Heart

I have suggested that Yoder's use of the term "doxology" includes and surpasses his use of the term "witness." Doxology surpasses witness partly because it clarifies that the deeds and words by which we confess our faith must come from the heart, from the depths of the human spirit as it experiences the Spirit of God. I believe Yoder does not adequately address what we might call human subjectivity. He is an ecclesial thinker, and that is good and needed in our individualistic age. But we are also *persons* in community, and for the person to be fully present in the community's praise of God we need a gospel that addresses us in the depths of our being. Yoder does not adequately consider how the person hears, experiences, and appropriates the community's language of faith. Granted, our witness is social and ecclesial, but for believers to be fully present and engaged in that witness they must be converted from the heart. We need what Yoder himself called "heartfelt religion"!

When we listen to the doxologies of believers, particularly new ones, we do indeed hear them singing "Worthy is the lamb that was slain." But we don't hear them continue only with "and has created a new peoplehood that bears witness to Christ's victory over the politics of the principalities and powers." We also hear them sing to the victory of Christ over bondage to evil spirits, over addiction to drugs and alcohol, over guilt and shame, and over a deep sense of meaninglessness. These songs too are signs of the coming kingdom. Yoder, like so many other insightful theologians, is aware of the danger of reducing the gospel to its subjective meaning. He rejects the widespread notion that religion deals with personal, not public, issues. He is critical of those he calls "the Bultmanns and Grahams" and "the Peales and Robertses" who focus primarily or only on what the gospel means for the believing individual. But in doing so he marginalizes the subjective, experiential dimensions of the gospel in a way that is unnecessary and unhelpful.¹⁰ He seems to say that the meaning of the gospel is structural and political, and that any personal meaning it has is accidental and secondary. This division is not true to a close reading of the gospels. Jesus announced

the kingdom not only as a new way of dealing with power and structural relationships but as a power that healed and delivered people in bondage to deeply personal destructive powers.¹¹

We need language and theological reflection that names the way people actually experience the in-breaking reign of God and come to appropriate and inhabit the biblical narrative of redemption through Jesus. If a Yoderian language monitor is watching the discussion, we will not address this apart from how we learn faith by participating in a community defined by distinctive Christian practices. But the community of faith gains meaning and authority in people's lives at least partly because it provides meaningful maps for personal discovery and truthful self-awareness.

Conclusion

It is a misreading of Yoder to reduce his work to a program of social ethics. But the cure to peace and justice reductionism is to read more, not less, Yoder. The structure and meaning of his social ethic is that ethics is an expression of the victory of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Having flushed the confessional rabbit out of its socio-ecclesial habitat, we may now notice that by their very nature rabbits, especially Anabaptist-Mennonite ones, are rather shy, nervous creatures when thus exposed. Decency requires that we let the rabbit return to where it feels at home – in the set of practices and behaviors we call church.

Notes

¹ Yoder's work is best read as having a dual argumentative focus. On the one hand, he is arguing against Niebuhrian social realism and Troeltsch's description of the "sect" type of church which establishment Protestants use to argue that a separatist community seeking to consistently live out a Jesus ethic is socially irrelevant. On the other, he is arguing against Mennonites who accept this description of their social role.

² Yoder did not, however, abandon all forms of two-kingdom thinking. Following Karl Barth he made a critical distinction between those who confess faith or recognize the lordship of Christ and those who do not. He consistently argued that the difference between confession and non-confession should be a constitutive element of a Christian social ethic.

³ The phrase "a watching world" is from the subtitle of Yoder's *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001).

⁴ *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002 [1973]).

⁵ *Body Politics* passim. Other Yoder references in this section are to his *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and to *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁶ “Pacifism After Babel: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?” Peter Dula, MA Thesis. Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, January 1995. See especially 41-59.

⁷ *For the Nations*, 199-220. The specific section on “Not Engineering, but Doxology” is found on 209-15.

⁸ Yoder’s discussion of the church as a hermeneutical community in the context of a Pauline charismatic church order is developed in “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See especially 26-34.

⁹ Fortunately, an important set of lectures from one of Yoder’s seminary classes has recently been published. *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002) is a sustained patient reading of the church’s theological heritage. It clearly shows Yoder is a confessional, theological thinker, not a neo-Kantian or utilitarian interested only in the ethical meaning of faith language.

¹⁰ *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1977), 31-32.

¹¹ I have dealt with this issue at length in “The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision” in *Refocusing a Vision*, (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1995), 35-50. www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/DINTAMAN.htm.

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JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

John Howard Yoder's Contribution to Research on Anabaptist History

Hanspeter Jecker

A Brief Overview of Yoder's Publications on Anabaptist History¹

For this presentation I have compiled close to eighty titles of works by John Howard Yoder, either dealing primarily with Anabaptist and Mennonite history and theology or directly related to this topic.² My compilation is based primarily on Mark Thiessen Nation's *Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder*, 1997, as well as some later additions and my own amendments. Below I list approximately sixty titles that I consider the most important of these works. These titles vary in length from several pages to entire books—the latter appear in bold italics. Works not listed here are, as a rule, short book reviews.

- 1947 "The Swiss Mennonite Churches of Southern Wayne County,"
essay for Harold Bender's "Mennonite History" course, Goshen
College
- 1949 A series "What Would You Do If...?" published in *The Youth's
Christian Companion* under the pseudonym "An Anabaptist"
- 1950 Translation and publication of Harold Bender's "Anabaptist
Vision" in French (with Marthe Ropp)
- 1955 Several historical articles in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, I: Baccarat,
Bénaville, Bitscherland, Blanc-Rupt, Courgenay (5) [Hereafter
ME]
- 1955 Publication of "Principes et Doctrines Mennonites," with Pierre
Widmer
- 1956 Other articles in *ME* II: Diesen, France (2)
- 1957 "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in Hershberger, *The
Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*
- 1957 First specific book review in the field of Anabaptist History; Roger
Ley, *Kirchenzucht bei Zwingli*

- 1958 "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation," in *MQR* 32 (April 1958)
- 1959 "Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism," in *MQR* (Jan 1959)
- 1959 "How to Deal with Anabaptists: An Unpublished Letter of Heinrich Bullinger," in *MQR* 33 (April 1959), with Heinold Fast
- 1959 Articles in *ME* IV on Zofingen and Zwingli (2)
- 1960 Review of Fritz Heyer, *Kirchenbegriff der Schwärmer*
- 1961 ***Translation of Verheyden, Anabaptism in Flanders, 1530-1650 – A Century of Struggle***
- 1961 Reviews of Siegfried Rother's *Die religiösen und geistlichen Grundlagen der Politik Huldreich Zwinglis and Heinrich Schmid's Zwinglis Lehre von der göttlichen und menschlichen Gerechtigkeit* (2)
- 1962 ***Täuferum und Reformation im Gespräch (I)*** [Now translated: Part I of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004)]
- 1962 "Von Göttlicher und Menschlicher Gerechtigkeit" in *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* (Reply to W. Schweizer)
- 1967 "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," *MQR* 41 (Oct 1967)
- 1967 Introduction to the chapters "Anabaptist Origins in Switzerland," "Persecution and Consolidation," and "A Summary of the Anabaptist Vision" in C.J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (also in later editions) (3)
- 1968 ***Täuferum und Reformation im Gespräch (II)*** [Now translated: Part II of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004)]
- 1968 Review of Fritz Schäufole, *Das missionarische Bewusstsein und Wirken der Täufer*, *MQR* 42 (Jan 1968)
- 1969 "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation," *MQR* 43 (Jan 1969)
- 1969 "Conflict from the Perspective of Anabaptist History and Theology" (unpublished paper presented at Mennonite Graduate Fellowship, Ithaca, NY)
- 1970 "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in Klassen, *Consultation on Anabaptist Mennonite Theology* (Aspen)

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- 1971 "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," in *Concern* 18/1971
- 1972 "Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns," in *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24/1972 [Hereafter *MGBI*]
- 1973 ***The Legacy of Michael Sattler***
- 1973 "Briefwechsel über die Bedeutung des Schleitheimer Bekenntnisses," in *MGBI* 30/1973
- 1974 Review of James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, in *Church History* 43 (June 1974)
- 1974 "Anabaptists and the Sword Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2/1974
- 1975 "Foreword" to the new edition of Blanke, *Brüder in Christo* (zum 450-Jahr-Jubiläum, hg. durch den Schweizerischen Verein für Täufergeschichte, [Zürich 1975])
- 1975 "Anabaptism and History – Restitution and the Possibility of Renewal," in Goertz, *Umstrittenes Täuferturn*
- 1976 ***Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical*** (Ed.)
- 1976 "A la recherche du Bucar de l'histoire," in *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de Protestantisme*
- 1977 "The Anabaptists," in Dowley (Ed.), *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*
- 1977 *The Schleithem Confession* (Ed./Translator) Pamphlet
- 1977 "Introduction," in Lienhard (Ed.), *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism*
- 1977 "Les Frères Suisses," in Liver (Ed.), *Strasbourg au Coeur Religieux du XVIe siècle*
- 1977 "Martin Luther's Forgotten Vision," in *The Other Side* (April 1977)
- 1978 "Quelques Anabaptistes Notoires," in Rapp (Ed.), *Grandes Figures de l'Humanisme Alsacien*
- 1978 "Radical Reformation Ethics in Ecumenical Perspective," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
- 1978 "'Spirit' and the Varieties of Reformation Radicalism," in Horst (Ed.), *De Geest in het geding*

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- 1979 "The Enthusiasts and the Reformation," in Moltmann/Küng (Ed.), *Conflicts About the Holy Spirit* (in French: "Les illuminés et la Réforme," in *Concilium* 143/1979, 67-74).
- 1980 "Introduction: Les origines de l'anabaptisme au sein de la réforme du XVIe siècle," in Michiels, *Les Anabaptistes des Vosges*
- 1983 "Anabaptists in the Continental Reformation," in Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution*
- 1984 **God's Revolution: The Witness of Eberhard Arnold** (Ed./Translator, with Hutterian Society of Brothers)
- 1984 "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," in Swartley (Ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*
- 1986 "Les troubles aux Pays-Bas dans le miroir strasbourgeois," in Horst (Ed.), *The Dutch Dissenters*
- 1987 Review of McMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, in *Journal of Church and State* 29 (Winter 1987)
- 1988 "The Anabaptist Shape of Liberation," in Loewen (Ed.), *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*
- 1989 **Balthasar Hubmaier—Theologian of Anabaptism** (Ed./Translator, with Wayne Pipkin)
- 1989 "The Historic Peace Churches: Heirs to the Radical Reformation," in Parker/Fraser (Ed.), *Peace, War and God's Justice*
- 1991 Review of Lavater (Ed.), *Lebenn nach der Ler Jhesu*, in *MQR* 65 (July 1991)
- 1992 "Christologie et dissidence au sein de la réforme zwinglienne," in Doré (Ed.), *Jésus-Christ aux marges de la réforme*
- 1993 "Swiss Anabaptism," in Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (3rd Edition)
- 1995 "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation: Strengths and Weaknesses," in: Hughes (Ed.), *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*
- 1995 Review of Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, in *Church History* 64 (March 1995)

Observations and Conclusions

This list suggests that Yoder's contributions to Anabaptist and Mennonite history are concentrated in the late 1950s and around 1975. Both high points of publication coincide with Yoder's longer stays in Europe. This chronological concentration of publications would be even more visible if we were to consider not just the dates of publication but the time of writing. During his first stay in Europe Yoder was quite preoccupied with his Basel dissertation on the dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers. This period of his life is usually referred to as the "hidden years," during which many of his convictions apparently took form.³

Yoder's second extended trip to Europe took place in the mid-1970s in the context of, among other things, events celebrating the 450th anniversary of Anabaptism (1525-1975). These circumstances gave Yoder multiple opportunities to speak out on Anabaptist and Mennonite matters. In relation to his well-known essay "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality,"⁴ one could say that when in Europe Yoder mainly did historical work to lay the foundation for his own interpretation of an "Anabaptist Vision,"⁵ while in North America he was concerned mostly with the conflict between Mennonite reality and the overarching religious and social realities of his time.

Yoder's works on Anabaptist history are almost exclusively based on already published printed sources, with relatively few works dealing with and elaborating on new historical material. However, bear in mind that some of the printed material Yoder used was very old, hardly accessible, and therefore rarely used. Nevertheless, even in his dissertation, probably his most important work on Anabaptism, the bibliography contains no section entitled "Unpublished works."

It is striking that Yoder, aside from his dissertation, published so few extensive, specifically Anabaptist works. Even such rare instances often deal with ideas he had already touched upon in the dissertation (which was actually published relatively late). In this regard can be mentioned "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation" (1958), "Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism" (1959), "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" (1967/1984), "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation" (1969), "Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns" (1972) with the

subsequent correspondence with Klaus Deppermann (1973), and debates about James Stayer's *Anabaptists and the Sword* (1974f).

It is also interesting how relatively early this category of works comes to an end. Yoder's subsequent publications dealing with Anabaptist issues bear a much stronger theological emphasis (insofar as such a distinction should or can be made at all). Or perhaps one should address this from another angle: the audiences and dialogue partners of Yoder's later work, increasingly and explicitly, are people both inside and outside a specific Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition who are struggling to be faithful Christians and a faithful church in the modern world. They were interested primarily in these issues, not in the history or theology of Anabaptism.

In light of the content of Yoder's late-published dissertation, it is astonishing that contemporary response to it in professional circles remained relatively modest. In my opinion, Yoder's work deserves much more attention, even today. There were in fact debates with Robert Walton about Zwingli and with Klaus Deppermann about the importance of events at Schleithem and Strasbourg in the early years of Anabaptism; and with James Stayer (and Hans-Jürgen Goertz and others) about violence in early Anabaptism, "true Anabaptism," and "confessional historiography." However, as far as Yoder's involvement is concerned, all of these discussions were soon ended.

With the development of "revisionist" studies of Anabaptism, the general interest shifted to other topics and authors. The "Bender school," represented primarily by such publications as the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, was heavily criticized by revisionist historians.⁶ It was accused of idealizing the Zürich Anabaptism of Grebel and Mantz, which was viewed as the norm and original form of "true Anabaptism." According to this understanding (of "true Anabaptism"), whatever from the outset did not fit a free church movement—peaceful, non-violent, separated from the world, ready to suffer, and strongly committed to the Bible—was excluded as non-Anabaptist.

Yoder, in spite of his occasional in-house, exceptionally sharp criticism of Bender—his long-time teacher and mentor—saw his own work identified with the "Bender school" and carried away with it by the flow of debate.⁷ In part this was not fair, but it was also not entirely unjustified. In my view, Yoder too generally and uncritically considered things to be

implemented in early Swiss Anabaptism that corresponded with his own convictions about the core of the Gospel and his contemporary analysis of the demands of the hour. I have my doubts, and observe in the Anabaptism of the time many more shadows (weaknesses, limitations, open questions, etc.) next to the striking light (strengths, virtues, definitive answers, etc.). Yoder depicted this light impressively, and thus shaped and provided vision to whole generations. However, just like today, the shadows were already there in the sixteenth century. It would help us deal with our own shadows if we could see that shadows existed and persisted in the past, and how they were, or were not, dealt with.

Yoder focused almost all his Anabaptist historical work on the beginning years of Anabaptism, predominantly on the Swiss Brethren. With the start of Anabaptism comes the important main objective, for Yoder, of universal spiritual renewal through rediscovery of a messianic community, radical following of Jesus, devotion to nonviolence, and willingness to suffer. What comes afterwards is for him a fall from the high ideal of this “Anabaptist Vision” into the narrow-mindedness of a denominational “Mennonite Reality.”⁸

It is a pity, from the viewpoint of Anabaptist history, that Yoder did very minimal historical research on later developments, such as on the later Swiss Brethren. First, I think the decline wasn’t so extensive. Some of the early Anabaptist concerns that were so important for Yoder continued, although often in a slightly modified form. Secondly, in the following years the Anabaptists dealt with how a second and third generation could live with the need for a complete spiritual renewal. Now, new questions had to be answered: how faithfulness could be distinguished from stubbornness and assimilation, or when compromise deserved to be called laziness. The challenge here was whether and to what extent, from the Anabaptist standpoint, a life of “second best solutions” could be lived faithfully. Another issue was how a life with repeated individual and community failures could be lived in a hopeful, satisfying way. How, then, can and should we live “between the times”? How can we live in the tension between “Anabaptist Vision” and “Mennonite Reality” (or more generally “human reality”)? All these questions are still pressing for us today, and I would like to have seen more extensive fundamental historical research by Yoder on them.⁹

Running like a thread through Yoder's works is a concern to encourage and motivate people, both inside and outside their congregations and linguistic areas, to become engaged with Anabaptist history and theology. Examples include Yoder's translation and publication of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" in French (1950), and his francophone summary of Anabaptist-Mennonite doctrine (1955). Equally important are his years-long work with different editions of C.J. Dyck's *Introduction to Mennonite History* (1967f) and his numerous editions and translations of various sources of Anabaptist history into English, French, and Spanish. Extremely important and impossible to overestimate is the influence of Yoder's decades of teaching at different theological schools, the significant number of lectures he gave, including many multiple-day Bible courses in local congregations, and numerous articles in church publications. Anabaptist historical aspects were always either the central theme or incorporated into these presentations. It is noteworthy that Yoder often gave significant stimulus and encouragement to establishing Anabaptist historical societies, such as the Swiss Society for Anabaptist History in 1973.

With the last title on my personal list of Yoder's works (the review of *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* by Liechty), Yoder brought up a topic that was then on everyone's mind, spirituality. It would be very interesting to know more about the subject from him—if possible with reference to early Anabaptist history. All the more so, since he has been accused of creating the conditions for the loss of spirituality and personal faith within Mennonite communities because of the direction of his research.¹⁰

Yoder's own historical and theological work was always closely related to the places where he resided and the people with whom he felt connected. This is illustrated even in the first title in my list, a church history paper on "The Swiss Mennonite Churches of Southern Wayne County." Long after Yoder left Europe, he could often be found in different churches and conferences, teaching very specific topics. There we came to see some of his "love of Jesus and his congregation" that every now and then came through in a stiff, emotionless way, but nevertheless was genuine and had a longlasting impact. Many experienced their first formative encounters with him in such contexts. For them it meant the beginning of a path on which Yoder for decades played the inspiring, motivating role of teaching companion.

Notes

¹ This article was published in Hanspeter Jecker, ed., *Jesus folgen in einer pluralistischen Welt. Impulse aus der Arbeit John Howard Yoder* (Weisenheim, 2001), 157-66. It was presented first at a symposium held at the Bienenberg Theological Seminary, Liestal, Switzerland on September 10, 2000, as a short informal report, an addendum to Mark Thiessen Nation's bibliographical abstract. It has been slightly revised. On Yoder's engagement with Anabaptist history, refer to the second chapter in Thiessen Nation's dissertation, "The Ecumenical Patience and Vocation of John Howard Yoder: A Study in Theological Ethics," Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2000.

² Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997). Cf. the more detailed data on the separate works, which I mention here only if the work does not appear in Thiessen Nation.

³ See also Stanley Hauerwas in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 397f. James Reimer also reports the formation of important steadfast convictions with longlasting impact in this busy time of Yoder's life. However, he expresses himself much more critically: "Here was a man who seemed never to have changed his mind." *CGR* 16.2 (1998): 6.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in J.J. Klassen (Ed.), *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology: Papers Read at the 1969 Aspen Conference* (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 1-46.

⁵ This does not contradict the fact that from the 1950s Yoder had actively worked at ecumenical dialogue, including his time in Europe.

⁶ See a short historiographical survey in Hanspeter Jecker, *Ketzer-Rebellen-Heilige. Das Basler Täuferum von 1580-1700* (Basel, 1998), 20ff.

⁷ Compare the comprehensive bibliography by Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998).

⁸ Compare to *Concern* 18/1971, 22ff.

⁹ Compare with John D. Roth, "Living Between the Times: 'The Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality' Revisited," in *MQR* 69 (July 1995): 323-35.

¹⁰ E.g., Stephen Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision" in *CGR* 10 (Spring 1992): 205-08, or "The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision" in *MQR* 69 (July 1995): 307-22.

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JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

Walking With Yoder Toward a Theological Approach to the Automobile from a Mennonite Perspective

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For many, the word “Mennonite” is synonymous with “Old Order Mennonite” or “Amish.” It connotes a group of people who maintain a unique religiosity and lifestyle, most notable for their plain dress and rejection of modern conveniences; at the very least, it might bring to mind a postcard image of a horse and buggy. In light of this popular perception, it is ironic that most members of Mennonite churches in North America are not distinguishable from mainstream society merely on the basis of the technologies they utilize. Despite having their own counter-cultural legacy, perhaps best exemplified in their pacifist witness, so-called “modern” Mennonite theological and ethical reflections have not directly addressed the topic of technology. In my view, it would be a mistake to conclude that this lack of reflection means that technology is *not* of significance for the religious values of these same Mennonites.

There are a few obvious places to look in order to begin to address this gap in Mennonite theological discourse. For example, the word “technology” is sprinkled throughout a number of essays by A. James Reimer as a result of his interaction with philosophers such as Hans Jonas and (especially) George Grant.¹ Like Grant, however, for Reimer the topic of technology is only raised as a symptom of an underlying intellectual problem; furthermore, he is convinced that the theological resources necessary to address it are found outside the Mennonite tradition. Gordon D. Kaufman’s approach to theology is clearly motivated by his concern over our capacity to destroy life on earth, a capacity made possible by recent weapons technology and widespread industrialization.² For Kaufman, the solution to this problem is not found in either the Mennonite tradition or the return to a classical worldview, but in the radical reconstruction of our understanding of God in light of our contemporary situation.

A final example of a possible starting place to address this gap for Mennonites is found in the recently published proceedings of a conference on the pressing topic of biotechnology. Held at Eastern Mennonite University in the fall of 2003, this event included contributions from theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Joseph J. Kotva, and James C. Peterson in addition to contributions from scientists, nurses, doctors, and philosophers.³ While all the participants attempted to relate their reflections to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, the diversity of their perspectives confirms that much more work must be done to understand the implications of this tradition for the topic of technology. Nonetheless, it is a promising sign that these participants recognized their religious values had something to say about biotechnology.⁴

This essay seeks to demonstrate that the work of one of the most significant twentieth-century Mennonite theologians, John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), is suggestive of a distinctive theological approach to technology. I am not arguing that Yoder's theology is the only way forward; rather, I intend to show that resources available in the Mennonite tradition can be used to practice thinking theologically about technology.

Relating Yoder's Theological Stance to Technology in General

Many have pointed out the fundamental coherence of the wide-ranging work of John Howard Yoder.⁵ One would suspect that someone whose thinking was so rigorous and consistent would have attempted a more systematic project, but Yoder repeatedly disavowed "starting from scratch." He concluded his only book dedicated to formal theology with an explanation of why he avoided the issues normally dealt with in the prolegomena of systematic theologies: "we do not begin with the fiction of starting from scratch with a blank mind that needs to be convinced. There are no blank minds."⁶ And he introduced his last collection of essays with a similar comment: "One reason I do not start from scratch to do a book on just one subject is that there is no scratch from which to start. Every theme is already awash in debate."⁷ Yoder rejected the foundationalist assumption so common in modern scholarship—that all knowledge should be built upon universally accepted categories of reason and experience; he argued that there was no neutral or non-particular place from which to begin.

Yet to call Yoder “anti-foundationalist” would be misleading. Indeed, he was skeptical not just of foundationalist methodology but of what he called “methodologism”—all attempts to uncover the “first principles” that supposedly lie “before” or “beneath” a discussion.⁸ What then was his alternative? The conclusion to *Preface to Theology* is instructive: “We have not found that we needed for our purposes to set up any particular rules about logic. We just went ahead with the discussion in the community in which we found ourselves.”⁹ For Yoder this community was the church. His approach to theology wasn’t bound together by a philosophy or methodology but by his commitment to the church—to persons of every tribe and tongue, people and nation, who confess that Jesus is Lord.

Yoder’s writing was clearly consistent with his attitude toward methodology. Rather than constructing a timeless systematic theology, Yoder assembled (or allowed others to assemble) anthologies, collections of essays organized around particular themes.¹⁰ For him, like his sixteenth-century Anabaptist forebears, system building was “a rare privilege.” He argued that a theologian is “always ‘on the way’ because his or her first duty is always to a present crisis of disobedience or opportunity.”¹¹ He was certain that whatever overall coherence could be found in his work had less to do with his own intellectual might than to the working of God’s spirit through the various communities that had commissioned it.

Yoder’s corpus provides numerous examples of how his theological “stance”¹² could be applied by churches in specific cases. Indeed, he proposed that Christians accept a plurality of approaches, a general grammar of faith, rather than restricting themselves to one approach or another: “there is no obligation to reason in the same way on all subjects. . . . Instead of making the case for the priority of one style, what I have argued is thus that all of them are needed, precisely because none of them may be dominant.”¹³ This stance has much in common with the biblical narrative and its “multiplicity of styles,” a “mixing and matching” of praise, prophecy, and blame rather than concern for one proper mode of discourse.¹⁴ However, while Yoder may have resisted the search for absolutes and the urge to systematize, he was not resigned to relativism. Instead, his theology was characterized by patience; he continued to advocate radical discipleship while recognizing that *he* could never offer a final reading: “The key to the obedience of God’s people” as

one of his best known quotations puts it, “is not their effectiveness but their patience.”¹⁵ One indication of his appreciation of this value was found in his commitment to ecumenical conversation, a conversation that not only showed respect for those who disagreed but remained vulnerable to their insights.

The ongoing challenge for those interpreting and evaluating Yoder’s work is to find ways to apply his thought to new contexts. What does his stance suggest for the particular concerns of the church that he did not address? In my view, given that we live in an age increasingly defined by the opportunities and challenges of technology, those working in the tradition of Yoder need to practice thinking theologically about technology.¹⁶ I am not under the illusion that a full-blown theology of technology can be mined from Yoder’s work or that he would have, or could have, provided answers before he was asked a question about technology. Nonetheless, by looking to Jacques Ellul, the well-known French sociologist and lay theologian, I think we find one suggestion for how we might proceed to develop a theological approach to technology in general that is faithful to Yoder’s thought.

Known principally for his critique of technological systems and ways of thinking,¹⁷ Ellul shares Yoder’s rejection of traditional disciplinary boundaries and efforts to construct comprehensive systems of thought. The most important connection, however, is their appropriation of the biblical concept of the “principalities and powers,” a connection pointed to by Yoder himself¹⁸ and later highlighted by Marva Dawn.¹⁹ Both Ellul and Yoder reject modern attempts to demythologize the biblical worldview, choosing instead to try to demythologize the contemporary world in order to expose the fallacy of modern myths that have too often gone unquestioned. It is thus not surprising that both would choose to embrace the principalities and powers language from the Pauline literature,²⁰ language often explained away as part of an antiquated worldview. The reality of the powers and Christ’s lordship over them is “the true situation of the world,” to use Ellul’s words,²¹ or a “declaration of the nature of the cosmos,” to use Yoder’s.²²

Yoder’s fullest discussion of the powers is found in chapter eight (“Christ and Power”) of *The Politics of Jesus*. There he reviews the various ways “structure” is used in contemporary discourse, suggesting that this provides an analogy to the biblical concept of the powers. “Structure” can

refer to a physical artifact such as, for example, a bridge, but it also points to “the patterns or regularities that transcend or precede or condition the individual phenomena we can immediately perceive.”²³ “Structure” reminds us that a bridge is more than the sum of the cables and girders used to build it. In the same way the biblical concept of the powers enables us to perceive this “more than the sum of” factor that, despite its profound significance, has often remained nameless.

Yoder contends that these powers were created by God and remain under God’s sovereignty even though they have fallen. Indeed, society would not be possible without order and structure, and so we “*cannot live without them*.”²⁴ Thus Yoder stresses the positive role of the powers in human existence, valuing the order and regularity that they enable as part of God’s good creation. Even in their fallen state they perform necessary functions; Yoder goes so far as to say that “tyranny is still better than chaos.”²⁵ However, he also stresses that instead of enabling freedom and love, these powers have demanded our loyalty and enslaved us, so that we “*cannot live with them*.”²⁶ Bridges make travel easier, but they also favor particular modes of transportation and particular destinations over others. Yoder does not go any further in discussing the manifestations of these powers; instead he points to the social analysis of Jacques Ellul as an example of someone who “thinks the most consistently within the framework of this approach.”²⁷ This endorsement suggests that Yoder’s discussion of how the powers are overcome will offer a suggestion for how the church should approach particular manifestations of the powers that Ellul grapples with, particularly technological systems and ways of thinking.

Like Ellul, Yoder doesn’t believe that humans (or God) can simply get rid of the powers; after all, our subordination to them is what makes us human:

If then God is going to save his creatures in their humanity, the Powers cannot simply be destroyed or set aside or ignored. Their sovereignty must be broken. This is what Jesus did, concretely and historically, by living a genuinely free and human existence.²⁸

Jesus, like all people, was subject to the powers, but he refused “to support them in their self-glorification” and thus refused the temptation of idolatry.

His willingness to give up his life to the powers manifest in the Roman government and Jewish religious elite is a sign of this refusal: “Not even to save his own life [would] he let himself be made a slave of these Powers.”²⁹ Jesus’ death was a victory over the powers, disarming and making a public example of them by revealing their true nature. It is this victory that the church proclaims by confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. In Ellul’s words, this victory “reveals another direction for life, another choice, namely, of non-power.”³⁰

Yoder stresses that the church itself does not break the sovereignty of the powers but “concentrates on not being seduced by them”; it is not a matter of fighting the battle that Christ has already won.³¹ Thus Yoder’s primary concern with the power of technology would be that the church avoid being seduced by it. The seductiveness of technological systems and ways of thinking lies in their ability to blind us to their real power, to make us think we are doing the “responsible” thing or solving worthy problems when we are actually placing our faith in something other than the power of God. The “real power” or the “greater than the sum of” factor of our pursuit of technology is not readily apparent to us.

How can the church avoid this seduction? In Ellul’s writing one is left wondering if it can. While technological systems and ways of thinking ultimately remain subordinate to Christ, Ellul regards them as autonomous and thus any efforts to redirect or transform them will ultimately be futile. As a power, technology is fallen and can only be overcome or transcended, not redirected or transformed.³² Here Yoder would likely part ways with Ellul, and argue that instead of focusing on the possibility that individuals might avoid the seduction of technology through spiritual heroics, we should focus on the possibility that a community might avoid that seduction through concrete practices. Yoder more closely links the powers with human and social realities:

The Powers have been defeated not by some cosmic hocus-pocus but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon them is not the working of magical words nor the fulfillment of a legal contract calling for the shedding of innocent blood, but the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely

orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church who herself is a structure and a power in society.³³

Not only does Yoder emphasize the positive role of the powers in human existence, he stresses that Jesus' overcoming of their sovereignty was a human and social act, not just a spiritual one.

Indeed, far from advocating the sectarian withdrawal from culture or the spiritual transcendence of it, Yoder argues that the church, by focusing first on being the church, is capable of affecting the authentic transformation of its surrounding culture – and, I would add, its surrounding technology. The key is that this transformation is not about re-building the world as much as it is about building the church; not about the witness of the church leading to social transformation in the world at large but about transforming the world *into* the church.³⁴ Yoder would agree with Ellul that efforts to take responsibility for the direction of technology in general are futile, but he would also argue that this does not preclude the possibility that a community might transform technology in the particular by following the way of Jesus. For it is only the presence of an alternative power that makes resisting the seduction of the fallen powers possible. Thus for Yoder the authentic transformation of technology *is* possible when it is subordinated to the power of Christ and embodied in the church.

Yoder's perspective on the autonomy of the powers is shaped by his Anabaptist anthropology and its affirmation of the freedom of the will, but it is also consistent with his overall theological stance. Yoder approached the powers of the world the same way he approached theological reflection: he started with the church, and was willing to be patient.³⁵ Yet he would not be content with a general strategy for resisting the seduction of the power of technology and technological ways of thinking. Particular, concrete manifestations of the transformed power of technology are what would really matter for him.

The Automobile as a Test Case

Over the past century the automobile has become a significant force in the economy, environment, and culture of industrialized nations. Because the development and use of this particular manifestation of technology is now pervasive and routine, it may not seem to be the most enthralling entry point

into a discussion of the *theological* significance of technology. Indeed, historian Wesley Swanson has suggested that the study of “common cultural artifacts” such as the automobile is “often clouded by over-familiarity and a lack of perspective.”³⁶ Yet this is precisely why the automobile makes such a good case study. It is *because* the automobile is now mundane, because the arguments extolling both its virtues and pitfalls are now mature, that an examination of the issues involved can benefit greatly from the perspective offered by theological discourse. In addition, our intimate knowledge of a familiar or mature technology has the potential to enrich further reflection on unfamiliar or new technologies.³⁷

Of course, the basic problem with any mature argument is that positions become polarized and entrenched. Thus, not surprisingly, clarity is *not* what one finds when searching for an overarching assessment of the automobile in contemporary culture. On one side, authors in environmental science and political philosophy such as Julie Meaton and David Morrice provide helpful summaries of the litany of familiar social and technical problems, ranging from unsightly urban sprawl and the pain caused by accidents, to the unpleasant delays of traffic congestion and the unbelievable scale at which nonrenewable resources are being converted into dangerous pollutants.³⁸ While many of us are sympathetic toward those arguing that the use of the automobile should be restricted or at least reduced, we continue to drive more and more.³⁹ We are, according to critics of the automobile, not being rational.

On the other side, those defending the automobile agree that its status has declined and that drivers are often seen to be a public nuisance. As columnist John Tierney recently wrote, “Americans still love to own their cars, but they’re sick of everyone else’s.”⁴⁰ However, in contrast to the suggestion of critics that a conspiracy of corporate interests is responsible for foisting the car on us, commentators such as Tierney suggest that liberal intellectual elites are responsible for turning people against the car.⁴¹ To be sure, no advocates of driving more will deny the reality of the environmental problems caused by driving. However, they are convinced that these costs will continue decreasing with the development of new technology, and that the benefits of the automobile have been under-valued. Critics of the automobile, they say, are not being rational.

The result of all this irrationality is that car enthusiasts and car critics end up shouting at a crowd who cannot hear them, a crowd that, to use Howard P. Segal's apt term, has found a way to *accommodate* the automobile.⁴² For the most part, our culture has accepted this particular type of technology, whether it does so happily or grudgingly. In a word, we have been *seduced* by it. Whether we know it and resent being manipulated, or whether we don't know it and feel nothing but love, the automobile has seductively found its way into our lives.

The key for moving beyond this impasse toward a more helpful overarching assessment of the automobile is to recognize that it is more than a scientific, economic, or political debate. In Swanson's words, "To understand the appeal and vital symbolic power of the automobile it is essential *not* to view it as a transportation device."⁴³ Drivers will not necessarily give up their wheels on the basis of a more compelling cost-benefit analysis, or even when encouraged to do so by political policy. Nor will car critics endorse new highway construction even if everyone drove hybrid vehicles. At its core this impasse relates to differences over fundamental human values.

One study of the automobile that moves beyond the realm of science, economics, and politics is *For the Love of the Automobile* by Wolfgang Sachs.⁴⁴ Sachs, who studied both sociology and theology, is a German professor currently working on globalization and sustainable development. He begins his book with the same question that other critics of the automobile find so vexing:

The problem with the automobile today consists precisely in the fact that the automobile is *not* a problem. Why, I asked myself, does the loyalty to automobiles remain so unassailable, even though everyone knows that cars already have their future behind them?⁴⁵

Sachs's reading of the development of the automobile in Germany is an attempt to show that it is a "morality play."⁴⁶ He demonstrates this alternative view by discussing the motivation of the first drivers, all of whom were elites and enthusiasts more concerned with social status and mastery of their environment than with mobility. Thus the "automobile sank its roots into society from the top down."⁴⁷ The rest of the book shows just how deep these roots go, how the automobile itself became dependent on complex

technological systems and, more important, came to embody specific values. Citing the often quoted phrase from Roland Barthes that the automobile is “the Gothic cathedral of modern times,” Sachs argues that just as “the cathedral is not merely a shelter, so the automobile is more than a means of transport; automobiles are, indeed, the material representations of a culture.”²⁴⁸ I will discuss two of the values of this culture below.

Sachs’s discussion of the values embodied by the automobile comes in a section of chapters called “Desires.” The first of these he titles “Independent as a Lord,” what I will call “the value of autonomy.” In contrast to the railroad, which condemns us to passivity, the automobile requires our active involvement. It requires that *we* choose when to depart and which route to take. American philosopher Loren Lomasky has expanded this point in his essay “Autonomy and Automobility,”²⁴⁹ arguing that self-directedness or autonomy is a distinctively human trait and thus any technology that enhances it is inherently good. In short, “automobile transport is good for people in virtue of its intrinsic features.”²⁵⁰ He is convinced that the ability of the automobile to enhance autonomy is rivaled only by the printing press and possibly the computer.

Lomasky’s essay helps explain the irrational behavior of drivers. People prefer driving to the bus, streetcar or train; they “vote with their tires”²⁵¹ because the costs of driving do not outweigh the inherent value of autonomy, a value that the automobile’s critics have not fully considered. The importance of this value is seen in the fact that drivers are willing to put up with such high economic and social costs. For example, if cars are valued strictly for their mobility, why do so many people endure spending so much time sitting in traffic jams during their daily commute? Autonomy is more about individual control than mobility, and driving allows people to regain control over their immediate environment.

Yet Lomasky’s essay is problematic. Although autonomy was valued long before the car came along, Sachs wonders to what extent this technology allowed this particular value to increase in importance:

Technology does not simply fall from the sky; rather, the aspirations of a society (or a class) combine with technical possibility to inject a bit of culture into the design like a genetic code. Yet neither do lifestyle and desires emerge from the thin

air of culture; instead they coalesce around a given technology. A technological invention is often accompanied by cultural creativity.⁵²

Thus the value of autonomy has “coalesced” around the automobile, and the automobile has allowed it to appear as if “natural.”⁵³ To what extent, then, has the premium Lomasky places on autonomy been influenced by the very technology he endorses because it complements this value? How far has the automobile contributed to a wave of “cultural creativity” characterized by the valuing of autonomy and the flourishing of individualism? Sachs suggests that independence or autonomy is a value embodied not only in automobiles but in all modern technology: “Technology fulfills the desire to leave behind burdensome social, spatial, or temporal ties and become one’s own master.”⁵⁴

For Sachs, the irony of this emphasis is that the more prevalent automobiles became, the less autonomous the drivers became. Autonomy is not lost because of traffic jams but because of dependence on the vast technological systems that make driving possible: “Ultimately all these ‘independence machines’ depend on streets and power lines, pipelines and radio waves, which in turn bind the individual with multiple ties to industries, power plants, drilling rigs, and broadcast stations.” Every “increment of freedom in our private lives” comes at the cost of greater dependence on others. Thus “we have metamorphosed once again from drivers into passengers, even if self-propelled.”⁵⁵ Put another way: “The desires of yesterday rain down on us as the compulsions of today.”⁵⁶

The second value embodied by the automobile that Sachs discusses is “victorious speed.” Again, this is a value absorbed in the automobile’s early days when the new invention was promoted through competitive races. Sachs suggests that the spectacle of car racing and the corresponding thrill of high-speed driving resulted in “nothing less than a new perception of reality”:

. . . drawing on pleasure and superiority in the role of driver, by teasing the limits of both the automobile and one’s own fate, so that the world, the tired, old world, flew by and an admiring gaze looked after.⁵⁷

Czech novelist Milan Kundera describes this reality in terms the enthusiast understands best: “Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on [humanity].”⁷⁵⁸

It is not difficult to see how, as with autonomy, the value of speed is embodied in numerous other examples of modern technology. Technology is better when it is faster, whether it is the computer used to design the car, the assembly line used to build it, the car itself when it accelerates to pass a truck on a country road, or the pay-at-the-pump service station used to replenish the car with fuel. Speed, it turns out, is not only pleasurable because it is risky, it is pleasurable because it is efficient. In the words of esteemed historian of technology Lewis Mumford, “There is only one efficient speed: *faster*.”⁷⁵⁹

Just as the value of autonomy was both embodied and encouraged by the automobile, so too was the value of speed. The transformation of the tired, old world into the blur of a new world that makes our eyes water as it goes rushing by contributes to our assumption that history too is rushing forward, progressing in a straight line toward ever greater accomplishments. Once again we find a certain irony here. As Kundera suggests, often speed is more about what we are rushing away from than what we are rushing to: “the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.”⁷⁶⁰ Furthermore, the seduction of the value of speed is evident in how more time is lost than gained as the speed of travel increases. As Sachs points out, instead of saving time, the automobile encourages us to travel farther: “its powers of speed are cashed in not for less time on the road, but for longer routes.”⁷⁶¹ Or, put even more strongly, “The masters of space and time awoken to find themselves slaves of distance and haste.”⁷⁶²

Applying Yoder’s Stance to the Automobile

The above discussion of the automobile was intended to demonstrate that the polarized and entrenched perspectives of enthusiasts and critics can be traced to a conflict over the values embodied and encouraged by this particular technology. If this assessment is correct, then the starting place for addressing this conflict needs to be on the level of values rather than science, economics, or politics. Our scientific research, economic policies,

and political action must be informed by an ethic, an ethic that for Christians must itself be informed by a theological vision.

How then could John Howard Yoder's stance inform a theological approach to the automobile from a Mennonite perspective? There are several obvious points of connection with Sachs's portrayal of the history of the automobile. First, the automobile can be thought of as a manifestation of the biblical concept of the principalities and powers as understood by Yoder. The automobile is itself composed of numerous particular technologies and depends on numerous others that form a complex technological system. This system, or structure, to use Yoder's word, is more than the sum of its particular technologies, for it embodies the values of the technological way of thinking that created it. Moreover, the automobile itself encourages and extends this way of thinking, and thus we find ourselves being seduced by its power. Like all the powers, the automobile is both evil and fallen – we (and the rest of creation) cannot live with it, and good and necessary – we cannot live without it. So, in Sachs's words, "Even when we find ourselves up to our necks in harmful consequences, a kind of structural irresponsibility blocks the necessary change of course."⁶³

For Yoder, the way past this blockage is to recognize that the powers have already been defeated and put in their place by the death of Jesus Christ. As we have seen, for Yoder the authentic transformation of the powers, in this case the power of the automobile, *is* possible when it is subordinated to the power of Christ and embodied in the church. Of course, this transformation involves much more than the physical artifact of the automobile itself, as if the church could provide after-market kits capable of redeeming the vehicles in its parking lots. This transformation must touch the vast technological system that automobiles are a part of, and, most important for this essay, it must touch the values embodied and encouraged by the automobile. Indeed, the clash between Yoder's theology and the technological way of thinking embodied and encouraged by the automobile could not be starker.

This leads to a second obvious point of connection between Sachs and Yoder, their assessment of the value of autonomy. Yoder's starting place for theological reflection as well as his ethical response to the powers, his commitment to the church, would lead him to question the importance that thinkers like Lomasky place on the value of individual autonomy. In my

view, Yoder would concur with Sachs that individual autonomy as manifest in the automobile is ultimately illusionary. We are inevitably dependent upon a community, and technology both amplifies and obscures that dependence; as Sachs puts it, more than ever we are passengers, even if “self-propelled” ones. The critical point for Yoder is the nature or character of the community that we depend on. Is it based upon impersonal, distant relationships mediated by technology and motivated by necessity and economic self-interest, or is it based upon personal, face-to-face relationships motivated by love and the interests of others? Yoder’s theology clearly values the latter. Going beyond Sachs, his theology could be used to argue that, just as the church by focusing on being the church can avoid the seduction of the powers in general, it can also avoid the seduction of the value of autonomy embodied and encouraged by the automobile in particular. Voluntary allegiance to the church does not mean the end of our individuality; rather, it is a sign of our recognition that individualism is both illusionary and destructive.

A third obvious point of connection between Sachs and Yoder is their assessment of the value of speed. Yoder would likely concur with Sachs and Kundera that speed is risky not only because of the possibility of accidents but because of how it makes us forget. By extending the potential range of travel, the increased speed of the automobile makes us forget what ties us to a particular place. Further, going beyond Sachs now, speed makes us forget that ultimately God is in control of history. Yoder’s theology reminds us that, despite the impressive scale and scope of technology, both it and we have limits. His theological stance, and his suggestion for how we can resist the seduction of the powers in general, is characterized by patience. The value of patience is obviously relevant for avoiding seduction by the value of speed embodied and encouraged by the automobile. This alternative value encourages us be mindful of the working of God’s spirit in the world instead of rushing in to make the world come out right. While cars encourage us to accelerate our efforts, Yoder encourages us to slow down. While they urge us to throw caution to the wind, he urges us to be careful. And while they encourage us to stick our noses where they don’t belong, at times he encourages us to sit still and wait. Yoder’s values are not simply theological principles; they are also practices.

Like his Anabaptist forebears, Yoder refuses to separate theology from ethics, belief from practice, or thought from action. Thus he would

disagree with many in the Christian tradition who assume that theology is related to ethics in a hierarchical fashion. Following Yoder, I agree that ideally our beliefs should shape our practices, but the reality is that often they do not. Why do we ignore or forget what we believe, or allow our beliefs to be twisted? As our study of one particular example of technology indicates, I think it is because our practices end up shaping our beliefs. Thus I would argue that there are times when, in order to get our thinking right, we have to start acting in the right way. To put it another way, participating in Christian practices shapes us into the kind of people who truly believe. Yet my discussion of the practices of commitment to the church and patience has thus far been limited to generalities; thus I must now suggest a few particular forms these practices might take when applied to the automobile in a congregational setting. This is by no means an exhaustive or exclusive list.⁶⁴

To start with, I suggest that the value of commitment has implications for the ownership of automobiles. One reason the value of autonomy is magnified by automobiles is that they are most often at the disposal of a single individual, a reality demonstrated by our language. If someone asked me how I traveled to school today, they might expect me to say either that I caught *the* bus or I drove *my* car. Recognizing that automobiles will often be necessary for the foreseeable future, the value of autonomy could be diminished if the church was a place that made it possible for its members to get by with less than one car per adult in every household. People within households could be encouraged to find ways of sharing a car, but this could also extend beyond households to include other church members, or participation in local car sharing co-operatives. There are certainly good economic and environmental reasons for pursuing this path, but there is also the recognition that diminishing the importance of autonomy in deciding how we travel from place to place will increase commitment to a particular community.⁶⁵

Furthermore, the value of commitment also has implications for how we value particular geographic places. One way a church could build commitment to a local community is if its members shared that community. Churches should encourage members to make living in close proximity to each other a priority, and should strive to build relationships with non-

members living in the neighborhood of the church. The idea that our church would dictate where we buy a house seems even more counter-cultural than the idea that it would encourage us to make do with fewer cars, but again we should see that our decisions on these matters are never about either asserting or giving up our individuality. We are simply choosing to commit ourselves to different types of community.

Moving on to the value of patience, I suggest that here we find implications for the practice of driving. Since failing to wear seatbelts and speeding are, aside from alcohol impairment, the leading causes of traffic fatalities, perhaps these implications are obvious.⁶⁶ But patience implies much more than taking the time to buckle up, follow speed limits, and contain our road rage. In what is quite possibly the only article focused on the automobile that has been published in a theological journal, John Waterson notes that “to suggest that anyone was a *sinful* driver would in general merely provoke amusement. Yet that is precisely what we all are from time to time.”⁶⁷ Indeed, we are all guilty, at the very least, of a host of minor sins while behind the wheel, ranging from allowing ourselves to be distracted by children bickering in the backseat to driving on too little sleep. We are all guilty of failing to take full responsibility for the “lethal weapon”⁶⁸ at our disposal, and only thanks to luck, or perhaps the grace of God, have we avoided facing frightening consequences for these minor sins. The church should be a place where bad habits are recognized and confessed, and good habits are developed and nurtured, and this should certainly apply to driving. Indeed, a key characteristic of good drivers, as Waterson points out, is humility: “first-class drivers [are] given to continual searching examination of their own performance, with devoted striving to do better.”⁶⁹ Humility or self-critique is closely related to the value of patience; it is hard to get one without the other.

Finally, the value of patience also has implications for how we relate to the automobiles we drive. Most of us have been taught to use or consume technology with a “black box” mentality. We turn on our computer and expect to begin typing an essay, or, for in the case at hand, we turn the ignition key in our car and expect it to go. Everything that occurs in between the initial input and the desired result remains a mystery. Philosopher Albert Borgmann has suggested that this mentality is why technology leads to the

separation of means and ends (or practices and beliefs) so characteristic of modern life.⁷⁰ His analysis of technology as a “device paradigm” is incisive, and his urging a return to a more traditional life of engagement through “focal things and practices” is made even more compelling when applied to Yoder’s preferred starting point of the church.⁷¹ In my view, the value of patience makes the possibility of turning means into ends, for example, of transforming an automobile from a device into a thing, much more likely. One final suggestion, then, is that churches encourage their members to take the time to learn the basics of automobile technology – for example, how engine performance impacts fuel consumption – in order to become more aware of how their inputs while driving are translated into desired (as well as undesired) ends. Again, there are good economic and environmental reasons for pursuing this path, but the larger aim is to nurture the re-connection of practice and belief that the automobile’s seductive power has divided.

Conclusion

This essay has offered brief overviews of one contemporary Mennonite theologian, one particular technology, and the ethical implications of the intersection of these two realms. The thesis I set out to demonstrate is that Yoder’s work not only is relevant for reflecting theologically on technology in general but, more important, has significant ethical implications for how we approach particular technologies. The values of Yoder’s theology *can* be translated into particular, concrete practices that will enable the church to resist the seduction of the power of the values embodied and encouraged by the automobile. I have suggested four practices, but there are many more. In leaving the impression that I have only scratched the surface of the ways Yoder’s thought can be applied to the realm of technology, I hope to encourage further Mennonite reflection in this area.

Notes

¹ Cf. A. James Reimer, chapter one, “Theological Method, Modernity, and the Role of Tradition,” and chapter four, “Transcendence, Social Justice, and Pluralism: Three Competing Agendas in Contemporary Theology,” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, co-published with Herald Press, 2001).

² Cf. Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³ Roman J. Miller, Beryl H. Brubaker, and James C. Peterson, eds., *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes: Ethics of Biotechnology* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, co-published with Herald Press, 2005).

⁴ This diversity was highlighted by Conrad G. Brunk in his review of the conference – see “Biotechnology and the Future,” in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*, 257-60. In his own work, Brunk has helpfully focused attention on how technology poses *moral* risks in addition to the readily apparent environmental, economic, and social risks, a concern that this essay is intended to underline. See “The Biotechnology Vision: Insights from Anabaptist Values,” in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*, 106-21, as well as “Religion, Risk, and the Technological Society,” in *The Twenty-First Century Confronts Its Gods: Globalization, Technology, and War*, ed. David J. Hawkin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004): 45-58.

⁵ Cf. A. James Reimer, “Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 16.2 (Spring 1998): 5-14. My summary of Yoder in this section resonates with Harry Huebner’s extended treatment in “The Christian Life as Gift and Patience: Why Yoder Has Trouble with Method,” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA and Scottdale, PA: Cascadia Publishing House and Herald Press, 2004): 23-38.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 401.

⁷ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 10.

⁸ John Howard Yoder, “Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism,” in *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancy Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77.

⁹ Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 401.

¹⁰ Gerald Schlabach has highlighted this point in “Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder’s Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71.2 (April 1997): 305-09.

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 121.

¹² Yoder recommended the use of the word “stance” rather than “system” to describe the coherence of his writing. See *For the Nations*, 10.

¹³ Yoder, “Walk and Word,” 84-86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 232. See also Yoder, “‘Patience’ as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship ‘Absolute’?” in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John*

Howard Yoder, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 24-42.

¹⁶ Following the suggestion of a leading contemporary philosopher of technology, Carl Mitcham, I define technology rather simply and inclusively as “the making and using of artifacts.” See *Thinking Through Technology: The Path Between Engineering and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1. However, it is also important to draw attention to the ways of thinking that gave rise to modern technology and to the complex interactions between particular technologies. Thus in the paragraphs that follow I discuss not only the material manifestations of technology but the significance of technological ways of thinking and technological systems.

¹⁷ The word “technology” in most English translations of Ellul’s work refers to *la technique*, defined as the “totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.” See the “Note to the Reader” in the American edition of Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkenson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), xxv. In this essay my use of “technological ways of thinking” is shorthand for Ellul’s definition of *la technique*. In his later work Ellul became increasingly concerned with the impact of technological systems – the complex interactions and dependencies necessitated by modern technology – and thus his critique does have implications both for the material manifestations of technology and for the way of thinking that led to them in the first place. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980).

¹⁸ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 157, and *For the Nations*, 35.

¹⁹ Marva J. Dawn, “The Biblical Concept of ‘the Principalities and Powers’: John Yoder Points to Jacques Ellul,” in *The Wisdom of the Cross*, 168-86. While I share Dawn’s interest in relating Yoder and Ellul, in this essay I approach this connection from the opposite direction: Ellul points Mennonites in search of a theology of technology to Yoder.

²⁰ Cf. Romans 8: 38-39, Ephesians 6:10-17, and Colossians 1: 15-17.

²¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 25.

²² Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 157.

²³ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁰ Jacques Ellul, “Technology and the Gospel,” *International Review of Mission* 66.262 (April 1977): 114.

³¹ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 150.

³² Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxxiii. This emphasis on the autonomy of technological systems and ways of thinking is undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of Ellul’s sociological analysis.

³³ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 158.

³⁴ This reading of Yoder is shared by Chris K. Huebner in "Patience, Witness, and the Scattered Body of Christ: Yoder and Virilio on Knowledge, Politics, and Speed" in Ollenburger and Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 56-74.

³⁵ Yoder's approach contrasts with, at one extreme, that of modern theologians preoccupied with the search for the "right 'handle' by which one can 'get a hold on' the course of history and move it in the right direction" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 228). These theologians often end up at least appearing rather instrumental or, better yet, technological. They know their theology is right when history is moving in the right direction. Yoder's emphasis on patience reflects his conviction that human agency is limited. At the other extreme his approach contrasts with that of Christian millennialists or spiritualists (and to a lesser extent Ellul) who are preoccupied with getting out of the way as God steers the course of history to completion. By confining faith to other-worldly concerns, spiritualists often end up baptizing as God-ordained whatever the status quo happens to be. Yoder's emphasis on the church reflects his conviction that God's spirit is at work in the world through the agency of transformed individuals and institutions.

³⁶ Wesley Swanson, "The Cult of the Automobile," *Epoche* 18 (1983), 98.

³⁷ Carl D. Bowman makes a similar point in "Emerging Biotechnologies: A Historical Perspective," in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*.

³⁸ Julia Meaton and David Morrice, "The Ethics and Politics of Private Automobile Use," *Environmental Ethics* 18.1 (Spring 1996): 39-54.

³⁹ The total number of vehicle miles traveled annually in the United States increased steadily from 2,296 billion in 1993 to 2,880 billion in 2003 (which translates into a total increase of approximately 2,000 additional miles per year for every person in the U.S.). See the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "Traffic Safety Facts 2003 – Overview," 3, available online at: <<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/TSF2003/809767.pdf>> Accessed on 10 February 2006. The same data is not available on a national basis for Canada, but it is safe to assume a similar trend. In Ontario, for example, the total number of vehicle kilometers traveled annually increased steadily from 76 billion in 1993 to 117 billion in 2003 (which translates into a total increase of approximately 2,500 km or 1,560 miles per year for every person in the province). See Section 3 of the "Ontario Road Safety Annual Report, 2003," available online at: <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/safety/orsar/orsar03/chp3_03.htm#data_chp_3> Accessed on 10 February 2006.

⁴⁰ John Tierney, "The Way We Drive Now: The Autonomist Manifesto (Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and love the Road): A Social, Moral and Environmental Case for Driving More," *New York Times Magazine* (26 September 2004), 60. Tierney continues to publish a steady stream of opinion pieces in a similar vein; cf. "Burn, Baby, Burn," *The New York Times* (7 February 2006), A21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴² Howard P. Segal, "The Automobile and the Prospect of an American Technological Plateau," *Soundings* 65.1 (Spring 1982): 83. Italics added.

⁴³ Swanson, "The Cult of the Automobile," 99.

⁴⁴ Subtitled *Looking Back into the History of Our Desires*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1992).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁹ *Independent Review* 2.1 (Summer 1997): 5-29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 92.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁸ Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 2.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 120.

⁶⁰ Kundera, *Slowness*, 39.

⁶¹ Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 185.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁴ I began this essay decrying the lack of Mennonite reflection on technology in general, and historian Marlene Epp has made a similar point regarding the automobile in particular. See “Mennonites were silent about the automobile,” *The Mennonite Reporter* 20.8 (April 16, 1990): 7. However, Donald B. Kraybill’s bibliography for the entry under “Automobile” in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* vol. 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989) notes several articles from church publications in the 1920s and 1930s that indicate some level of self-conscious discernment regarding the acceptance of this form of technology.

⁶⁵ Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities ban the *ownership*, not the *use*, of cars. Cf. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, revised ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 219.

⁶⁶ While in the United States seatbelt use has increased and alcohol-related fatalities have decreased since 1993, the percentage of fatal accidents in which excessive speed was a factor has actually increased over the same period. See the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s “Traffic Safety Facts 2003 – Overview,” 3-7. Comparable national data is not available for Canada.

⁶⁷ John H.L. Waterson, “Religion and Road Safety,” *Theology* 64 (1961): 228.

⁶⁸ Barbara Halton Stoops, “Driving as Christians,” *Engage/Social Action* 15 (1987), 20.

⁶⁹ Waterson, “Religion and Road Safety,” 229.

⁷⁰ Cf. “The Invisibility of Contemporary Culture” in Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

⁷¹ Borgmann’s primary concern in his recent work is with the transformation of society. Cf. his discussion of “public celebrations” in *Power Failure*, 117-28. Marva J. Dawn helpfully applies his concept of focal practices to the church in “How Can We Learn to Live the

Language of Focal Concerns,” of *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). While for Yoder the authentic transformation of technology would start with the church, he would never suggest it must be confined to the church. Since the boundary between the church and the world is blurred in all sorts of ways, not the least of which is in the realm of technology, I think Yoder would support translating the practices of the church into, for example, subsequent political advocacy for greater access to public transportation, zoning changes, and more extensive driver training requirements. For an illustration of this type of sequence, note how the “What Should the Governor Drive?” campaign initiated by the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign followed the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign initiated by Evangelicals for Social Action and the Evangelical Environmental Network, with its focus on educating congregations to see that their transportation choices are moral choices. See the Michigan Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, “What Should the Governor Drive? Recommendations for Improving the Fuel Economy of the State of Michigan’s Auto Fleet” (unpublished report, September 2003); and Ron Sider and Jim Ball, “What Would Jesus Drive? A Campaign Discussion Paper,” available at: <<http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/resources/paper/>> Accessed on 10 February 2006.

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John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptist and Reformers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder; translated by David Carl Stassen and C. Arnold Snyder. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2004.

Two writings, a historical study that earned John Howard Yoder his doctoral degree and a theological analysis of that study, previously published in German in 1962 and 1968 respectively, are translated and brought together here as a single project in two parts. The translation reads well, and the brief notes on translation are useful and clear. Those who want to cross-reference the English and German versions will be helped by the fact that both the structure of numbered chapters and sections, and the note-numbering scheme of Yoder's original publications, have been reproduced here.

Included are two informative secondary essays. C. Arnold Snyder, editor and co-translator (with David Stassen), deals in a Preface with Yoder as historian, a focus largely ignored amidst discussions of Yoder's theology and ethics. This essay (appearing in slightly revised form in this issue of *CGR*) brings to view Yoder's early approach to Anabaptist history, one that aligned with Harold Bender *et al.* regarding belief in a 'true Anabaptism.' Snyder also shows that Yoder's last direct, published engagement with Reformation historians dealing with the Anabaptists was an encounter with James Stayer's early work on the sword. Yoder did not directly engage the polygenesis scholarship of the mid-1970s but did modify his own narratives in light of the new scholarship; he accepted a broader historical definition as urged by revisionist historians (xxv-xxvii) even as he turned his attention to biblical studies, theology, and ethics. So, while Yoder's early historical work was challenged to some extent, Snyder notes that "it is strange but true that critiques of specific parts of [that] work seem to leave his work as a whole unchallenged" (xxxviii). This statement may not tell the whole story, since Yoder's work is challenged at various points but not often on the basis of engagement with his early historical work, even though this book makes it clear that many themes marking his later theological work are being developed in his historical analysis.

Neal Blough's essay, "The Historical Roots of John Howard Yoder's Theology," documents the relationship between Yoder's historical scholarship and the major theological themes he subsequently developed.

Blough notes that for Yoder the doing of church history was a way of entering ecumenical dialogue. Thus, for Yoder, being a church historian and being in dialogue were the same thing, as was doing theology and being in dialogue (xliii). Blough discusses emphases marking both Yoder's early historical work and later theological thought: the church as a place where the truth is sought and known; Christology and discipleship; Constantine and church history.

The heart of this volume is Yoder's two-part project. I was keenly interested in reading Yoder's sustained historical work, since I have read mostly his theological, biblical, and ethical material. Yoder's historical analysis of the dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers in Zurich from 1523 to 1538, for which he was awarded his doctorate, is a close reading of documents and a careful analysis bringing to light dimensions of the split between Zwingli and the Anabaptists that are important for Yoder's subsequent work. Yoder sees in the dialogues not primarily a contention over baptism but disputed understandings of the church community and its relationship to the world. Many other historical issues could be mentioned, such as the view of Anabaptists as children of Zwingli, his (Zwingli's) notions of human and divine justice, and so on.

Especially fascinating is Yoder's extensive treatment of the techniques of the disputations. He contends that the form Anabaptism takes is made visible in the course of the dialogues, a view which takes on more significance when we realize that he was then still looking for 'true Anabaptism.' Yoder claims that the mechanics of the disputations, that the Anabaptists called for them most of the time, and that recantation was a real possibility (all of which he terms an "inexhaustible will to dialogue") demand a theological explanation, which he provides in the second part of this book, a dogmatic-historical analysis of the dialogues. Here some of Yoder's later theological work comes plainly into view. In extended discussions of Zwingli's 'ontological dualism,' the rule of love, the authority of the church, hermeneutics, and ecclesiology, Yoder works out some of the material also on display especially in *The Christian Witness to the State* (published in 1964, between the original publication of the two parts of this book) and *The Politics of Jesus*. We can see here Yoder's intentional oscillation between 'for' and 'against' language regarding the relationship

of church and world, his exposing of false dualisms, and his criticism of the ways people have found to avoid the ethic of Jesus.

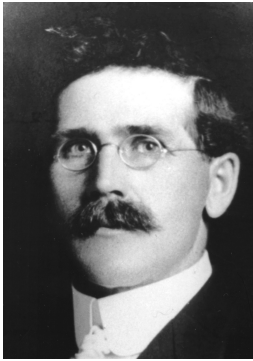
Yoder's sustained historical analysis and theological reflections evoke several reactions. There are instances within Yoder's work where I have wished for the kind of sustained account shown here. Some of his statements come off as either sweeping conclusions or a lumping together of seemingly disparate figures or ideas. For example, it has been suggested that responsible historians can only cringe in the face of "crudities" found in Yoder's *Royal Priesthood*, where the 'fall of the church' is located "at the point of that fusion of church and society in which Constantine was the architect, Eusebius the priest, Augustine the apologete, and the Crusades and Inquisition the culmination" (89). In some of his work we see fuller treatments than this, but even there discussions often come in the form of class lectures (*Preface to Theology*, and *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton*, or material available online). Yoder evidently intended to do this kind of historical work, as when he promises a fuller text on Constantine and the fourth century in *For the Nations* (6); reading this early book of his makes me wish he had done more of it.

Yet it seems to me that the biblical, theological, and ethical studies that so occupied much of Yoder's career were done not only to take up the themes that he uncovered in his historical work, but to continue the work of the church in the way it should be done—something he learned in his historical study of the Anabaptists. Thus one might say Yoder the historian is Yoder the theologian, trying to embody the very stance on display in those disputations. In that case, his oft-repeated statement that he was a church historian working as an amateur biblical scholar, theologian, and ethicist should not be considered just a modest aside. It also means that Michael Cartwright's description of Yoder as 'radically catholic,' a moniker accepted by Yoder, or Craig Carter's emphasis on Yoder's debt to Barth, while accurate, should not distract us from appreciating Yoder's indebtedness for substance and style to his Anabaptist forebears.

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2005 BENJAMIN EBY LECTURE

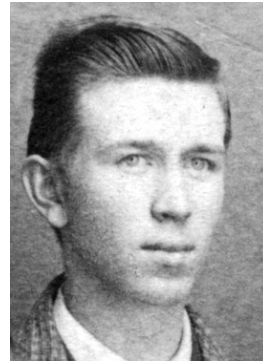
**A Mennonite Novelist's Journey (from) Home:
Ephraim Weber's Encounters with S.F. Coffman
and Lucy Maud Montgomery**



Ephraim Weber
(1870-1956)
Photo circa 1900



Lucy Maud Montgomery
(1874-1942)
Photo 1908



Samuel F. Coffman
(1872-1954)
Photo circa 1900

Hildi Froese Tiessen

Introduction: Weber, Montgomery and “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces”

What follows is, in large measure, a respectful investigation into the life of a man who grew up among the Mennonites of Waterloo County, Ontario well over a hundred years ago, but who found the Mennonites’ way of life not conducive to the realization of his deepest longing: to be a writer. Like so many writers – perhaps like most of us – Ephraim Weber occupied several worlds and was comfortable in none. “I want nothing so much as to write,”¹

Photos of Weber and Montgomery: Archival and Special Collections, McLaughlin Library, University of Guelph. Photo of Coffman: Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Conrad Grebel University College.

he wrote Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1903. As we shall see, Weber would leave the Mennonites in order to realize his longing to be a writer, and – following the pattern of the epics – he would return, finally, to the place from which he had begun and see it differently. He would absorb and confront his heritage – gently enough – in a novel: the great work of his life. Weber, the great-grandson of Benjamin Eby, lived to be 86 years old, and throughout his life he was, as his wife Annie Melrose remarked after his death, “ever the student.” “We are climbing the Alps of life,” he wrote when he was 27, eerily anticipating a lifetime replete with vocational disappointment. “We mount and slip and fall and rise and fall and rise and mount and tremble.” But, he added, the “awful avalanche of adversity must not dismay us.”²

I will begin by placing what I have to say into the context of my own scholarly interests, which have been focused over the past several decades on the emergence of a significant body of creative literature written by Mennonites in Canada. I have been interested, in particular, in two things: the often uneasy relationship between the Mennonite writer and his or her community, as one affects the other; and the impact that Mennonite literature has had on the construction of Mennonite identity in our time. I am interested in how Mennonite writers respond to their communities, and their communities to them; and in the fact that writers of Mennonite heritage – whether they embrace or reject the communities that nurtured them – contribute, in any case, to the construction/our conception of “the Mennonite” both within the Mennonite community and without. Nowhere are all these dynamics more evident than with respect to the recent (conflicted) reception of Miriam Toews’ novel *A Complicated Kindness*,³ about a disenchanting teenager appalled at what it means to be Mennonite in her small Mennonite prairie town.

* * *

Stories make us real, Rudy Wiebe has remarked. This investigation hinges on the discovery in Canada’s national archives of a story – a narrative in fiction – about Mennonites who lived in or around Kitchener, Ontario, in the early years of the last century. In June 1937 – two years after Ephraim Weber had begun to write his novel about Mennonites – Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote to him one of her wide-ranging, lengthy letters (in this case, some

thirty hand-written pages). Montgomery and Weber had been writing to each other for over three decades. She ended her letter with a breathless question: “Have you read ‘*Gone With the Wind*’!!!” In the body of her letter were comments on the immortality of the soul (on which Weber had delivered a sermon in his Saskatchewan church) and on other things, including the recent abdication of King Edward VIII, who, Montgomery declared, had expressed “senile folly” when he threw away “the crown of the greatest empire the world has ever seen . . . for the sake of a middle aged double divorcee!!” Edward VIII, she told Weber in exasperation, ought to have “his royal bottom soundly spanked.”⁴ Among these scattered bits of gossip and opinion was her response to Weber’s latest letter to her of some seven months before: “You were, when you wrote me, writing a novelette called ‘Aunt Rachel’s Will,’ she observed. “Is it finished? As you outlined it, it sounded like an ‘awfully good’ idea and something quite *new* – a rare thing nowadays when almost everything has been written about and almost every situation exploited.”⁵ The novel to which she refers – later called “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” – lies at the heart of this investigation.

The journey I’m about to map began some fifteen years ago, when Paul Tiessen and I stumbled upon a collection of letters in the National Archives in Ottawa – letters between the celebrity Canadian author of *Anne of Green Gables*, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and an Alberta homesteader named Ephraim Weber, who had spent the first twenty-six years of his life among the Mennonites of Kitchener (then known as Berlin). We became aware in Ottawa of other, related collections of letters in the National Archives – letters between Weber and two of his other correspondents (he had as many as thirty-two at a time): letters to Leslie Staebler, an old high school friend, who would intermittently keep Weber apprised of cultural developments in his home town (mostly of music and theater events); and letters to and from Wilfrid Eggleston, once a student of Weber’s and later a distinguished Canadian man of letters. We discovered to our great delight as scholars of Mennonite literature that these collections of letters from Weber to Staebler and between Weber and Eggleston – as well as from Montgomery to Weber – contained recurrent references to the novel Weber had begun to write in 1935: a “yarn,” as he called it, set in the environs of Kitchener, about three sisters whose acting out against their Mennonite congregation’s

rules regarding dress and deportment threatened to lead to a church split.

In his letters, especially those to Eggleston and Staebler, Weber documented his progress while writing this novel, which had a plot strangely evocative of an historical controversy concerning Mennonite women's compulsory wearing of the bonnet in the early decades of the century – a controversy that in 1924 led to a split in Kitchener's First Mennonite Church (where some of Weber's relatives still attended). Disagreement about what women in the Mennonite church should wear – especially upon their heads – plays a central role in Weber's novel, as it did in the "Old" Mennonite world in which Weber had once lived. I cannot explore the subject of nonconformity in dress here, but I will invoke the words of Melvin Gingerich, who observed in his study of the history of Mennonite costume, that "between 1865 and 1950 in the district and general conferences of the 'Old' Mennonite Church, the name widely used for the branch of the church established in America in the late seventeenth century [the branch of the church under discussion here], no [fewer] than 230 resolutions were passed on nonconformity in dress, more than on any other subject."⁶

The controversial material of Weber's novel is surely interesting, but the very existence of the work is itself worthy of attention, as anyone who has followed the emergence of Mennonite literature in Canada over the past few decades would agree. Prominent in the front lines of the current onslaught of Mennonite literary talent – indeed, on the foreground of English literature in Canada – are Mennonite writers like Sandra Birdsell and Rudy Wiebe and David Bergen, who was awarded the Scotiabank Giller Prize for fiction in 2005,⁷ and, of course, Miriam Toews, who won the Governor General's Award for fiction in 2004. It has for some time been generally acknowledged that Mennonite literature in English in Canada began with Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962,⁸ so Paul and I were enthralled when we happened upon the references to Ephraim Weber's work of fiction from a quarter of a century before Wiebe. Here was a Mennonite writer who predated the parade of Mennonite writers who had published scores of volumes of fiction and poetry over the past few decades – and remarkably often to national acclaim.

The only trouble was that the novel about which Weber's letters had so much to say was nowhere to be found. Driven by curiosity and a sense of

intrigue, we looked everywhere for it. We pressed the people at the National Archives to search for it, thinking it might have gone missing in their miles of shelves; we wrote letters of inquiry to newspapers across the country, and received among the responses some that were modestly useful, some mildly bizarre. Finally we located and visited those of Weber's friends who were still alive – all to no avail. After years of searching we were surprised and elated when a copy of the novel surfaced. We quickly realized that we had unwittingly been within perhaps twenty feet of the manuscript some years before.

The charming novel that Weber modestly and affectionately referred to as a “yarn” about three Mennonite sisters “on the border between Mennonitism and the world” (May 29, 1937)⁹ was given several names by him before he settled on “Aunt Rachel's Nieces.” He told his literary friends about his new work soon after he began to write it. To Leslie Staebler he wrote in June 1936 that he had “spent countless weeks on a yarn about three Mennonite maids,” and went on to describe how it just kept growing. “The story is stretching out to novel length,” he wrote Staebler a few months later, “and is probably on the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire. However, the scribbling thereof makes the days short and keeps me from reading myself stupid.”¹⁰ To Wilfrid Eggleston he explained that “It's a creation of the L.M. Montgomery type, of course: character continuity and atmosphere, &c. . . . Of one thing I'm sure,” he remarked, inimitably, “it is good practice.” After briefly outlining the plot, he ventured: “To my knowledge nobody has done this sort of thing.”¹¹ Weber's novel, a playful portrait of three sisters who struggle to be allowed to express their love for the arts in the context of powerful forces in their community, the members of which would rather they submitted quietly to church discipline (especially as it pertained to dress), begins like this:

Lucinda, Luanna, and Luella were the only ones of her forty nieces and nephews that Aunt Rachel had succeeded in naming permanently. She loved to name them in pairs and sets. A number of times she had tried to have a Mary and a Martha in at least one of the families of the “Freindschaft”; but the parents and relatives, knowing the Bible rather well, would unfailingly object that nobody could foretell which one would develop into

Mary, and which into Martha. A Mary named Martha, and a Martha named Mary, – “Ach, how stupid that would be,” cried Aunt Selina.

So the maiden aunt and the eldest member of a family of nine felt sweetly gratified when she had completed the building up of a set of Lu's in her youngest sister's family. The babies were not baptized with these names – Mennonites do not baptize infants; but the names were recorded in fancy letters in the family Bible, as well as in the books of the registrar of births. To all this the matronly aunt had attended with prompt devotion.¹²

As much as Weber's novel is central to my interests here, it is not the primary subject of this inquiry (I dealt with it in detail in my Edna Staebler Fellows Lecture at the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum in March 2006).¹³ The question I was attempting to answer, when I carried on my research for *this* essay, was: who was the author of this work of fiction – this man Weber, who grew up among the Mennonites of Waterloo County, later homesteaded with his family in the frontier Mennonite settlements in Alberta (then known as the Northwest, for Alberta didn't become a province until 1905), wrote letters to Lucy Maud Montgomery for nearly forty years, longed achingly to participate in the broader literary worlds of his day, and eventually came to write this work of fiction which, he confided to Staebler, he feared might offend the “old-school Mennonites”?¹⁴ What might knowledge of him contribute to our understanding of Mennonite literature in general – and especially to our consideration of one of its dominant themes: the relationship between the writer and his community? This paper is thus a kind of meta-exercise. That is, it reveals something about the subject of investigation, Ephraim Weber, and something about the trail of research that allowed me to discover who he was.

* * *

So obscure a man as Ephraim Weber may have escaped attention in an earlier era. But current scholarly conditions have made room for an investigation of the life and work of this minor Mennonite literary figure, and I have invoked many of these conditions in the course of my work. They include

such things as the thoughtful attention given over the past few decades to the very notion of minor literatures – such as the Jewish, West Indian, Chinese, South Asian, or Mennonite traditions within Canadian literature. Current scholarship in the humanities demonstrates a formidable interest in life-writing (diaries, journals, letters such as those that inform much of my work); it invokes a new respect for the history of print culture in general (the first volumes of the encyclopedia of print culture in Canada, which contain a brief chapter on the early print culture of the Mennonites, have just been published).¹⁵

The scholarly ethos that informs this work invites fresh inquiries into the very nature and function of archives (where it becomes ever clearer that we have both gathered and repressed much of our history); and it provokes intellectual curiosity among critical theorists about the sphere of “everyday life” – the “hidden and oft-suppressed”¹⁶ details and banal daily gestures by which people live¹⁷ – those things that are “‘left over’, and hence of little consequence in relation to such ‘superior’ pursuits” as politics, history, science, or theology. All these approaches to how scholars in the humanities are able to read the products of culture have encouraged our taking a close-up view of people and events we might once have overlooked. All these scholarly conditions have contributed to the intellectual ground upon which stands the investigation I am documenting here.

* * *

Ephraim Weber was by no means, when we first encountered him in the National Archives, completely unknown. His friend Wilfrid Eggleston had written extensively about him in his autobiography entitled *While I Still Remember*¹⁸ and elsewhere. Montgomery scholars like Muriel Millen¹⁹ or biographers like Mollie Gillen²⁰ acknowledged Weber’s existence too – and often drew heavily in their own work from the archival Montgomery/Weber correspondence – all the while sweeping Weber aside as a rather unsophisticated person who, by his own admission, didn’t read a word of English until he was twelve years old. (These same Montgomery scholars neglect to mention that in spite of his modest beginnings on a southwestern Ontario farm, Weber would later just miss completing a PhD in German literature at the University of Chicago after winning two gold medals

in graduate studies at Queen's.) Paul Tiessen and I wrote several pieces documenting the epistolary relationship between Weber and Montgomery,²¹ but the questions I found most compelling throughout our research remained unanswered: who was Weber in the context of Waterloo County's "Mennonite Country"? In what sense was he a Mennonite? What was the nature of his religious education, that he and Montgomery and later he and others of his correspondents should comment so broadly on religious matters? What compelled him to construct, decades after leaving the Mennonites of both Berlin/Kitchener and Alberta, a novel concerning three young women's struggle to express themselves artistically in a Mennonite congregation in his hometown? And what place might his novel have in the literature of the Mennonites of Canada?

* * *

In 1937 Weber predicted that if ever he were to "gain any moonish fame," it would be because he had become a "satellite" orbiting "around the greater heavenly bodies of Eggleston and Montgomery."²² He was to live another nineteen years after he made this remark; and four years after his sudden death by heart failure in 1956, it would seem that his prediction began to come true. It was then – in 1960 – that Toronto's Ryerson Press first published Eggleston's *The Green Gables Letters*, an edition of Montgomery's early letters to Weber,²³ letters that crossed the continent from Prince Edward Island to the Alberta plains and back between 1905 and 1909. In 1905 Montgomery and Weber had both been aspiring writers, each with a modest claim to success; by 1909 she was the international celebrity author of *Anne of Green Gables*,²⁴ and he was, well, still an aspiring writer (when he wasn't occupied as a wrangler or census-taker in the homestead territories of Alberta). Montgomery remained and remains a star in the international literary heavens, and Weber, as he predicted, would appear to have gained a slight bit of literary recognition because of his association with her.

But this essay is not solely concerned with Weber's relationship with Montgomery either – a relationship that, to be sure, drew our attention to Weber in the first place. For it was Weber we were interested in from the start, this native of Kitchener, this late-nineteenth-century Mennonite with an irrepressible longing to be a writer. So we began a search in earnest,

not for Ephraim Weber, warmly favored correspondent of Lucy Maud Montgomery, but for Ephraim Weber, Mennonite writer. And the place to begin appeared to be a U.S.-based Mennonite periodical called the *Young People's Paper*, where Weber was known to have published in the earliest days of his writing career.

Weber and the *Young People's Paper*

The *Young People's Paper* was published by the Mennonite Publishing Company in Elkhart, Indiana between 1894 and 1906, and was one of several initiatives of the prominent nineteenth-century Mennonite bishop and evangelist John Fretz Funk. Funk had, in 1864, founded the internationally distributed newspaper *Herald of Truth* (the first newspaper of the Mennonites of North America). Funk was committed to revitalizing the Mennonite church, and, indeed, had a long career as an extremely influential “reformulator of the Mennonite identity,” as Rod Sawatsky has put it. In fact, as Sawatsky has remarked, the changes in the Mennonite sensibility “spawned largely through the efforts of John [Fretz] Funk” are now read as the great “Mennonite awakening.”²⁵

A quick look at the history of the *Young People's Paper* reveals that Ephraim Weber was one of a stable of men listed as contributing editors over the paper's twelve-year run. As such, he served alongside prominent American Mennonites, indeed alongside some of the most influential figures in the history of the Mennonite Church in North America over the past century, ambitious men who “did much to mold the thought and activities of the church during an important period of awakening and expansion into organized church-wide activities.”²⁶ These men gave shape to what we now identify as “the Sunday school, mutual aid, publishing, missions, education, historical interpretation, peace work and relief work” of the Mennonite church.²⁷ As a regular contributor to and contributing editor of the *Young People's Paper*, Weber was in effect swept up among the most influential configuration of leaders in the Mennonite church of his day.

The *Young People's Paper* began in 1894 as an eight-page publication released bi-weekly. Reflecting on the paper at the end of its eleventh year, Bishop Funk described it as one “that will not teach the Young Christian to be worldly – and follow all the vanity and follies of the world, but to be

humble and pure. . .".²⁸ For this paper Weber, in the closing years of the century, wrote over 175 pieces, including poems, collections of aphorisms, and prose reflections of varying lengths – some just a paragraph long, others longer. His first contribution appeared in February 1896. He was then 26 years old and about to move from Berlin to the territory around Didsbury in the Northwest. It was there (in what is now southern Alberta) that Weber's family, under the leadership of his maternal grandfather Jacob Y. Shantz, had begun to homestead barely two years before. For this first column Weber took on an admonishing tone. He addressed his readers directly: "You have been working industriously all day and come home tired," he wrote. "After tea you feel somewhat refreshed. Picking up a paper to read, you notice in some prominent place a poem. Now, this time stop and read it."²⁹ Invoking some of the language he would later use in his letters to Montgomery, to whom he would declare that poetry was "the human soul's magic come out to sun itself in the grace of language,"³⁰ he said in this article that poetry "tends to make us better. It lifts us up out of the mire. It makes life beautiful. It nourishes the better nature of a man. . . ." People smothered by the cares of life need "aesthetic culture," he remarked, and the "poverty of the Philistine" is pitiable. "Then form the habit of perusing one poem in your paper," he urged his readers, observing that it will give them "intellectual development and soul culture. . .".³¹

Weber would write 13 pieces in all for publication in the *Young People's Paper* in 1896, 44 in 1897, 39 in 1898, 38 in 1899, 32 in 1900, and 9 in 1901. Beginning in March 1902, he would write the first of at least 11 letters that year to Montgomery; eight months later, in December, he would move to Philadelphia to pursue his literary fortune – as a guest of Miriam Zieber, a woman who advertised in the *Young People's Paper* her expertise in shaping literary careers (and, incidentally, the person who first suggested to Weber that he write to Montgomery, whose poetry he had so admired).

Weber would leave Zieber and Philadelphia some ten months later, deeply disappointed in his inability to accomplish what he had set out to do. In May 1904, after a sojourn with another literary friend in New Hampshire, and then a short visit with old friends in Berlin, he would return to Didsbury, from where he would re-establish himself on the prairie and write to Montgomery: "I had the grip for a week, and now except for blistered hands,

blistered feet, twitching muscles, aching bones, lame back, gnawing hunger, weariness, homesickness for civilization – I feel first rate. I’m just back from a chase after the cattle. I’ve been plowing, painting rooms, and milking.”³² He would spend another five sometimes nondescript, sometimes wild and woolly years as a homesteader, before embarking on what for him would become a soul-destroying career as a teacher in small prairie towns.

Teaching would remain a curse for Weber. It was how he made his living, but it was also, he believed, an activity that consumed all his energies and destroyed his soul. “[W]e have to educate the bum, the dandy, the athlete, the moron, and the pair in puppy love,” he complained to Eggleston, revealing his failure to see much good in the next generation. The only thing more intolerable than his lackluster and unambitious students were the members of the small town school boards, whose children he taught and – more often than not – refused to advance. These parents drove him to declare: “God made the country, man made the city, and the devil made the small town.”³³ But I’m getting a wee bit ahead of myself. Let’s return to the younger Weber, the *Young People’s Paper*, and the years before Montgomery.

The sensibility that would lie at the heart of Weber’s later fiction was readily discernable in much of his work for the *Young People’s Paper*. Here, in April 1897, he celebrated the imagination and what he called “the inner man”: “Oh the inner man wants sustenance!” he wrote. “Let him out, let him out!” “Open your clay door. The imagination is the key.” Invoking a lifelong antipathy towards doctrines and creeds, he criticized preachers for failing to recognize the power of imaginative thought: “when they discourse on the crucifixion,” he wrote, “on the mysteries of grace. . . , on the soul’s communion with its Author, on the Judgement day, on the joys of heaven, [they] would make more impression on their hearers if they wrought more sanctified imagination into it and less theology.”³⁴

Not a casual contrarian, Weber nevertheless passionately expressed his belief that there was much wrong with the world and so we should celebrate those who dare both to think independently and to demand change. “If men were as dwarfed and deformed physically as they are intellectually, morally, emotionally, aesthetically and spiritually, what hideous things many of them would be,” he declared. It is thanks to “the fault-finding

Emerson that we have a nobler morality; thanks to the fault-finding Ruskin that we can use our eyes when we walk the verdant paths of nature and visit the art gallery; thanks to the fault-finding Luther for the popular orthodoxy of justification by faith; blessed be the fault-finding Jesus of Nazareth for a new Christianity. All reformers are fault-finders.”³⁵

Weber's disposition as a regular contributor to the *Young People's Paper* was mostly pious and scripture-bound; his voice was literary, passionate, cajoling. In 1897, the year the paper carried more of his contributions than any other, his subject matter ranged from devotion and hard work to worldly ambition and the love of Mammon. Among other things, he addressed such subjects as temperance and testimonies, service, and forgiveness. In the three years following, he deliberated on prayer, temptation, God's promises, hospitality, personal growth, independent thought, moral courage, friendship, patriotism, bettering the world, recreation, education, the supernatural, the happy home, the Christian's use of time, penitence, humility, duty, honoring the Lord's day, the art of letter writing, and Christian zeal.

Weber in the Archives

The articles Weber contributed to the *Young People's Paper* during the years he began to find himself as a writer reveal he was complexly aware of, and largely in step with, the religious sensibility of the Mennonites of his day. After examining what he published there, I wondered what else I might learn about him. To Leslie Staebler he had written from Alberta, in 1902, “I have two or three very nice literary correspondents, to whom I write many a lonely hour and thus enjoy myself exquisitely.”³⁶ Is it possible, I wondered, that Weber had carried on a correspondence with one or more of his fellow contributing editors of the *Young People's Paper*? Or might any of these other editors have referred to him in their letters to each other?

Realizing that many of his collaborators were prominent enough that the archives of the Mennonite church in both Canada and the U.S. would likely have laid claim to their literary estates, I sent a student in search of Weber in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario at Conrad Grebel University College. Where to begin to look? I decided to start with the lists of names that appeared alongside Weber's on the masthead of the *Young People's Paper*: the other men on the editorial team – Steiner, Hostetler, and Coffman,³⁷ for example.

We did find an item of interest: a brief typed letter from Hostetler, written on the stationery of the Mennonite Evangelizing and Benevolent Board in Elkhart, Indiana (these men loved their lavish letterheads). It was addressed to S.F. Coffman and dated April 4, 1901.³⁸ It read, in part: “We are glad to hear of the encouraging work in the Northwest. If you see Ephraim Weber give him my very best regards.” Wow! This line in a letter to Coffman, who would later become so prominent a Mennonite churchman in Ontario. It wasn’t much but it was certainly something. Then it became even more interesting. The letter was addressed to Weber in Okotoks, Alberta. The single and handsome twenty-eight-year-old Coffman had been ordained by Bishop Funk in his early twenties, and would shortly become one of the most highly regarded and beloved bishops among the Mennonites in Ontario. And here he was in Alberta, while Weber was there (Coffman had been seconded by the Waterloo bishops to travel to Alberta – the Northwest – in 1901, to help Mennonite settlers organize themselves into congregations).

I poked around a bit more, and was intrigued to discover that the Mennonite Archives of Ontario holds a substantial S.F. Coffman collection that includes not only his daily journal of 1901³⁹ but also his 1901 letters from Alberta to his Indiana fiancée, Ella Mann. So I proceeded to sift through the files. (Among the fascinating things I found there was a large number of letters to the dashing young Coffman from so many of the young women he encountered in his ministry – “I’ll send you my picture if you send me yours. . .”).⁴⁰

Coffman in the Northwest

Coffman began to pack for his trip west on February 9, 1901. He left Toronto by Canadian Pacific Railway on February 19 and arrived in Calgary on the 23rd. By March 6 he had traveled to Carstairs,⁴¹ and on Saturday, March 9, he wrote: “Brother Steckle wanted to go over to Andrew Weber’s to get oats for feed. He drove over with the wagon, and I went along with him. We staid there for dinner. They have the best fixed up place I have seen yet. They have been here about seven years. Their two sons, Ephraim & Manasseh, have places near home.”⁴²

I had to fight not to get drawn into the western adventures of the young Coffman as he narrated them in his diary. I was particularly interested

in his reflections on how he spent his leisure time, sketching in pen and ink, or writing poetry and hymns. It appeared to me that the two poets Coffman and Weber had the potential to be what Montgomery would call “kindred spirits.” In fact Coffman’s reflections suggest that Weber made quite an impression on him. “I have met Ephraim Weber,” he wrote to Ella on April 16. “He is a young man yet. But he has a very wide awake appearance and seems to be a very fine young man.”⁴³ (Weber was actually two years Coffman’s senior.) The familiarity between the two men implied in these remarks is sustained in later letters to Ella, where Coffman refers to other members of the Weber family as “Ephraim’s father” or “Ephraim’s brother.”

Weber and Coffman apparently spoke often. Among the conversations Coffman carried on with various members of the community, he recorded the substance of very few. His journal entry for Friday, July 12 was an exception: “This afternoon I rode back to Ephraim Weber’s, had a visit there, went to Bro Henry Weber’s and staid there tonight. Ephraim called too in the evening. Had a very pleasant visit talking of God’s use of natural laws in the great changes, miraculous visitations of God upon the earth.” As if continuing the dialogue in his own mind, Coffman added: “God cannot go beyond His laws.”⁴⁴

Coffman’s journals reveal something of the texture of that time and place. Serving as an itinerant bishop, Coffman moved constantly from home to home, always engaged with the people around him, invariably busy, trying to be helpful. When he wasn’t giving the Mennonite homesteaders shaves and haircuts, he was fixing the pipes of their organs or repairing their sewing machines. He attempted to shoot owls and prairie hens (he never seemed to get very good at that), collected buffalo bones (he took several specimens back east with him, including a vertebra, out of which he had made an inkwell), and gathered wild flowers – the greatest of his passions – and then identified, pressed, and mounted them for a collection that numbered upwards of 160 species by the time he left the territory on November 11, 1901.

References to encounters with Weber are scattered throughout Coffman’s diary and letters of 1901. On April 9 Coffman wrote, “Ephraim Weber is not at home. [H]e is out taking the census for this district.”⁴⁵ On May 4 the inevitable: “Ephraim Weber’s father is a second cousin to us. Brother

Andrew Weber's (Ephraim's father) Grandfather and my Grandmother Coffman were brother and sister."⁴⁶ On May 11: "Rode up to the field where the men were working. Then called on Ephraim Weber's for a little while. He has a very pleasant home."⁴⁷ On July 13, Coffman "went over to Brother Andrew Weber's" (Ephraim's father). "Had a talk regarding the building of a meeting-house. He thinks it ought to be built 30 x 50. This may be a bit too large."⁴⁸ July 21: "I taught the Bible class. Ephraim Weber was present today."⁴⁹ August 19: "rode over to Bro Henry Weber's. Met Ephraim there again and had a pleasant visit. . ." ⁵⁰ September 10: "Adjusted the hair spring in Bro Weber's alarm clock so that it may be regulated again. Ephraim Weber came with some cattle he had been hunting. He staid all night. Had a long talk."⁵¹

On Sunday, September 15 Coffman wrote about helping the new congregation at Carstairs to choose its minister and deacon by the lot. On September 24, Ephraim's brother Manasseh was present when Coffman "[w]rote out a certificate of ordination."⁵² By late fall, Coffman, the itinerant bishop, was making his last rounds of the Alberta settlement and saying his good-byes. He missed saying farewell to Ephraim's father Andrew, who was "away threshing at the Honsburgers," but managed to catch Ephraim on November 8: "Called at Ephraim Weber's too," he recorded, and then hinting at their similar sensibilities and common interests, added, "Got my magazines there."⁵³

Three days later, on November 11, Coffman was gone. He had spent nine months in Alberta while Weber was there – months during which Weber would see his last nine articles appear in the *Young People's Paper*. Within five days of leaving the Northwest, Coffman was re-united with friends – and specifically with Ella Mann – in Indiana, where he dropped in at the Mennonite Publishing Company and, as he recorded in his diary, "saw Bro Funk." The next day he taught Sunday School and preached. "Bro J.F. Funk was present," he recorded.⁵⁴ Later that week he and Ella were married.

Weber's Restlessness

In the months during which Coffman and Weber overlapped in Alberta, Weber was growing restless as a writer and beginning to register an increasing spiritual hunger that, he would later remark to Leslie Staebler, he

was never able to satisfy – “this universal cry from the center of the heart for an unchangeable, substantial Something, not to be found in all the wide world of material things.”⁵⁵ In his own published reflections in the *Young People's Paper* he emphasized Christ as the Bread of Life, but sometimes his remarks seem little more than hollow platitudes alongside his passionate yearning after “fare for the *soul!*”⁵⁶

It is unlikely that Weber and Coffman remained in communication after Coffman left Alberta in 1901 (I've found no evidence of it). Decades later, in the summer of 1935, Weber decided on the spur of the moment to attend a Mennonite general conference in Kitchener, as a means, he reflected later, “of studying Mennonitism anew, in its latter-day aspects.”⁵⁷ At the conference he was approached by someone who invited him to consider writing a cultural history of the Mennonites. It may have been Coffman who extended the invitation, for he was very active at that conference, as his diary reveals, and as Chair of the Historical Committee he was uniquely poised to make such a gesture. It was this invitation that prompted Weber to embark on the cultural reflections that would become his novel “Aunt Rachel's Nieces” instead.

Weber and the Mennonites

My search for Weber's “Mennonitism” was richly rewarded in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, the S.F. Coffman collection in particular. A visit to the Mennonite Church Archives USA in Goshen, Indiana, where the John F. Funk collection occupies the largest swath of shelves, offered other resources, especially some that cast light on the wider Mennonite world into which Weber – as contributing editor of Funk's publishing enterprise the *Young People's Paper* – had inadvertently inserted himself. Here my search for information on Weber the Mennonite began much as my search in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario had begun. And once more it was C.K. Hostetler (who edited the *Young People's Paper* for most of the time Weber served as contributing editor) who led to the most interesting of my discoveries. Among the Hostetler papers was a neatly written four-page letter that began “Dear friend” and was signed “Sincerely and fraternally, Ephraim Weber.” Dated December 29, 1898, from Didsbury, Alberta, it was clearly a response to Hostetler's request for a sort of spiritual autobiography.

Much of Weber's candid self-description, which he wrote then with the understanding that it was not for publication, bears quoting:

I grew up in a beautiful farm home on Lancaster St. near Berlin, Ont. I loved farming ere I was in my teens even. . . . I attended school at Bridgeport, a near village, where I had many trials and tears – as all timid boys have at school; I learned slowly the first five years. After that I got over my extreme bashfulness and made faster progress. But after I was twelve I had to work on the farm in the summer, only attending the five winter months. One winter I worked in the Berlin Button Works, which employment was uncongenial to me. Most Winters I went to school again and kept on until July. When I passed entrance to High School I had now discovered a new kingdom, whose winding highways lured me on and on. . . .

Weber relates his substantial trials with high school – issues of confidence, issues related to health. He continues:

Then I went to Model School, passed and taught a public school, and in six months my dilapidated nerves gave out. I quit teaching and left for the Sanitarium, Battle Creek, Mich. where I sojourned four expensive months, with no improvement. A few months after leaving Battle Creek, I immigrated to our balmy Alberta, hoping simple life and easy open air work would in a few years have at least a [salutary] effect on me. So it has proved, only slower than even my little faith had made me expect. I am here thirty-three months.

. . .

I work about 200 days a year on our several farms. The remaining hundred I retire to my “literary den”, which is simply my brother's unoccupied, sod-roofed log shack. But a “snug little kingdom” it is.

Weber proceeds to describe how, as a bachelor, he has served as “cook, dairymaid [‘the merchants pronounced (his) butter “splendid”], washwoman, mistress and servant.” Remarking that his people have a church and a Sunday

School, and that they struggle with apathy, he observes:

As a rule new countries are not interested in intellectual and spiritual striving, and our colony is no exception. I have been teaching for ten years in S.S. – ever since my conversion, which took place among the pine stumps on the lovely Lancaster farm as I was plowing with an ox-team.

“I was twenty-eight in November,” he reports. “I should soon be old enough to know what my life-work is to be, should I not?” he asks provocatively, and then goes on:

You will already have conjectured what I do in my “den”. Here the hours pass quickly and sweetly in utter uninterruptedness. I read, reread, write, rewrite and criticize other men’s writings, with a view of disciplining my mind into clear thinking. My purpose is to chisel my thick head into an essayist’s. It is only several months since I gave up the notion of re-entering the ranks of the pedagogues and came to a definite conclusion to prepare myself for writing.⁵⁸

Five years later, when his engagement with the *Young People's Paper* had come to an end, and just three months after S.F. Coffman had returned to Ontario, Weber would write a first letter to Leslie Staebler, his old friend from Berlin High School. The world he knew on the Alberta plains, he remarked in February 1902, had grown “painfully leathery and metallic.”⁵⁹ Still, he had decided “to continue” in his “den” until November. “My solitude has not oppressed me quite so much lately,” he wrote. “This morning, for instance, the sun without and the ‘sun within’ and the unworldly quiet make an ideal Indian summer in this retreat of mine. I can read and think and exult in here as I cannot do elsewhere.”⁶⁰

A month later he would write his first letter to Lucy Maud Montgomery, dated March 12, 1902, and confess that he had not been productive as a writer but had “dabbled off and on at composition for ever so long a time.”⁶¹ Buoyed by her engaged response to his first letter, he wrote her again the day her first letter arrived. She had inquired about his literary work. “Ah me,” he replied, “‘tis ‘the pitifulest infinitesimal fraction of a product.’” But he had produced it in God’s name. He used “to send short poems and articles

to Young People's Paper, Elkhart, Ind. for a dollar each," he told her, but one day an Alberta wind caught up his "unprotected periodicals, goldenly laden with gems from [his] pen," and carried them "into the wilderness." He had never "been zealous enough for [his] lost brain children to organize a search party." He conjectured playfully that "Probably some of the poems are holding sweet communion with the wild roses, at whose prickly feet I hope they have by this time settled to rest from their flighty ways."⁶²

The disappearance of Weber's saved-up issues of the *Young People's Paper* – so poignantly described in this poetic flourish – takes on particular significance when one considers it in light of his move, during 1902, away from so much of what had defined his identity. In his letters to Montgomery, his voice takes on a tenor markedly different from the pious, admonishing tone of his writing for Elkhart only months before. He wrote at least eleven letters to her before the end of 1902. In their flurry of letters, he and Montgomery tested their interests and sensibilities with each other, and found they had much in common, including their metaphysical absorption of nature. He had recently given himself up to the night, he said. "I was the night and the chinook and the grass and the horizon and the wild roses and Wordsworth and the frogs," he wrote. "I don't know how to talk about it. I was infinitely refreshed."⁶³

By December 1902 Weber had moved to Philadelphia "to widen [his] life," to expand, as he called it, his "narrow existence."⁶⁴ In Montgomery he had found, earlier that year, someone with whom he could test what it might mean to be a writer. And what it might mean to be a Mennonite – and what it might mean NOT to be a Mennonite. It was in his fourth letter to her, written on May 10, 1902, that he had confessed he was "brought up a Mennonite." He asked her, "Have you ever heard of Mennonites?"⁶⁵

In his letter to Montgomery of June 6, Weber conflated religion and poetry, declaring that the more he thought "over God and life and nature and salvation and everything, the deeper and more missionful" did this art of poetry they shared seem to be. He continued, "It is a serious and profound undertaking to reach into the flying chaos of thought and emotion and bring out into black-and-white a hint of the Infinite, for whom mortals are thirsting so. Isn't this, dear friend, what we're trying to do? To me, God is a poet, and there is no poetry in which He is not."⁶⁶

Weber's early letters to Montgomery both effected and documented his movement away from the Mennonite community. He confided to her that he sensed another world opening up for him. He thought many of the "old ways and creeds" were obsolescent, and declared that he was not living the kind of life he would want to, that he was "in a transition stage from the old to the new."⁶⁷ In September he was more specific about what this transition might entail, and – implicitly invoking his devotional writing for the *Young People's Paper* in the years just past – he declared that "[I] shan't do any more Sunday school, preachy, wishy-washy, willy-nilly writing."⁶⁸ Religious problems were of special interest to him, he told Montgomery in October, because he was "in a transition from the old thought and creed to some new and undefined life."⁶⁹ "To save my soul," he told her in January 1903, he couldn't "settle down into any ready made faith."⁷⁰ He had taught a Bible class for fourteen years and knew the Bible extremely well, but he had begun to re-think what he now called the "wonder-book." He declared that the Bible is fine as "literary pabulum" and "all gold" as "a book of altruism and ethics." It is "greatest of all literature" and "an inspired record of revelation and a means of spiritual salvation," he acknowledged. Yet he wondered "how much of it [was] final and absolute truth."⁷¹

During the earliest months of his association with Montgomery, Weber questioned the formal assumptions that had created the framework of his Mennonite faith. By December 1903, realizing that the culture into which he was born offered him no entry – indeed blocked his path – relative to the literary world he longed to inhabit, he stepped away from the Mennonites: "What an advantage [you've had] to be *born* into reading!" he exclaimed to Montgomery. "I had to grind and chisel myself into it. Our [people] are not at all for intellect and culture. My parents have never heard of Shakespeare."⁷² On another occasion he wrote: "I didn't read anything until I was an adult. Such was my heredity and environment, and to this day I suffer from it."⁷³

Yet it was to his Mennonite world that Weber returned some thirty years later – now with the distance of someone who had been gone from home a long time, and with a gentle sense of irony mixed with unmediated affection for most of those he had left behind. It was then – after so long an absence – that he recognized the potential for fiction of the Mennonite

world he had once known and, wondering where this recognition would lead, he began to write the story-ette that would not stay short and that became “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces.”

About this novel – the great work of his life – he would much later remark to Eggleston: “The Mennonite reader may find it interesting but Mennonites are poor readers!! However, ‘tis writ, What . . . value it may have I’m not in a position to know.”⁷⁴ In 1945 he would recall the novel he had sent to several publishers around the time he had completed it, but not since 1938: “Reread some of it lately and was surprised how interesting I found it. But the Dickens of it,” he added, “is that it takes an educated Mennonite or ex-Mennonite to feel the interest, and there aren’t many such.”⁷⁵

Ephraim Weber’s conflicted relationship with the world of his ancestors is familiar enough among Mennonite authors. As seems to be the case with writers – both among Mennonites and in other literary communities – he carried his ancestors with him long after he thought he had left them behind. In 1946 Weber wrote about his life’s ambitions to Eggleston: “I will strive, I will practice, till I’ve worn out my corporal functions totally; then I’ll yearn, yearn, yearn, till the dark is too chilly and the silence too mighty; then I’ll distill into an essence or evaporate into a fragrance – but not, never, yield to extinction.”⁷⁶

I won’t speculate here on the degree to which my investigations into Weber’s life – or the planned publication of his novel, “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” – might rescue Weber from extinction.⁷⁷ But I will observe, finally, that the investigative search that allowed me to see something of who this man was and how he occupied various landscapes of Canadian culture and the ethos of the Mennonites of his day has comprised – for me – an extraordinarily exciting journey.

I would like to thank Paul Tiessen of Wilfrid Laurier University, whose collaboration richly informs all my work related to Ephraim Weber; and Ana Milanovic for her meticulous research on archival texts related to this project. Archivists Anne Goddard of Library and Archives Canada, Dennis Stoesz of Mennonite Church USA/Goshen Archives, and Sam Steiner of the Mennonite Archives of Ontario at Conrad Grebel University College

offered invaluable assistance. This work was made possible by funding from the Province of Ontario/University of Waterloo "Ontario Work Study Program" (OWSP), and the Faculty Research Grants Fund of Conrad Grebel University College. I greatly appreciate having been given the opportunity to present this work in a public forum, in Conrad Grebel University College's Benjamin Eby Lecture series.

Notes

¹ Ephraim Weber, in Wilfrid Eggleston, "A-precis [ca. 1959]." Unpublished precis of Ephraim Weber's unpublished letters to L.M. Montgomery, 1902-04. MG 30 D282 (now R4882-5-2-E). Wilfrid Eggleston Papers, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, 22. [*Abbreviated as A-precis*]

² Ephraim Weber, "Excelsior!" *Young People's Paper* (June 5, 1897): 91. [*Abbreviated as YPP*]

³ Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Knopf, 2004).

⁴ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *After Green Gables: L.M. Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916-1941*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 237. [*Abbreviated as AGG*]

⁵ *AGG*, 235.

⁶ Melvin Gingerich, *A History of Mennonite Costume*. Mimeographed manuscript [1964?], 6.

⁷ David Bergen, *The Time in Between* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005).

⁸ Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962).

⁹ Ephraim Weber, Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, May 29, 1937. MG 30 D282 (now R4882-5-2-E), volume 33-34. Wilfrid Eggleston Fonds. Weber-Eggleston Letters, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. [*Abbreviated as EW-WE Letters*]

¹⁰ Ephraim Weber, *Ephraim Weber's Letters Home, 1902-1955: Letters from Ephraim Weber to Leslie Staebler of Waterloo County*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen (Waterloo, ON: MLR Editions Canada, 1996), 70. [*Abbreviated as EWLH*]

¹¹ EW-WE Letters, October 18, 1936.

¹² Ephraim Weber, "Aunt Rachel's Nieces," Unpublished novel. MG 30 D282 (now R4882-5-2-E), volume 42. Wilfrid Eggleston Fonds. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, 1. For permission to publish the words of Ephraim Weber, I am grateful to Abraham Kidd and Margaret Melrose Kidd.

¹³ As 2005 Edna Staebler Research Fellow at the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum in Kitchener, Ontario, I presented a lecture entitled "The Story of a Novel: How We Found Ephraim Weber's Three Mennonite Maids." The lecture, conceived as an introduction to Weber's novel, will soon be available in the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum series.

¹⁴ *EWLH*, 71.

¹⁵ I refer here to *History of the Book in Canada. Volume 1: Beginnings to 1840*. Ed. Patricia Lockhart Fleming, Gilles Gallichan, and Yvan Lamonde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) and *History of the Book in Canada. Volume 2: 1840-1918*. Ed. Yvan Lamonde, Patricia Lockhart Fleming, and Fiona A. Black (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

¹⁷ See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life. Vol. 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*. Trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2002).

¹⁸ Wilfrid Eggleston, *While I Still Remember: A Personal Record* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Muriel Millen, "Who Was Ephraim Weber?," *Queen's Quarterly* (Summer 1961): 333-36.

²⁰ Mollie Gillen, *The Wheel of Things: A Biography of L.M. Montgomery, Author of 'Anne of Green Gables'* (London: Harrap, 1975).

²¹ See Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Tiessen, "Lucy Maud Montgomery's Ephraim Weber (1870-1956): 'a slight degree of literary recognition.'" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1993): 43-54; and "Epistolary Performance: Writing Mr. Weber," in *The Intimate Life of L.M. Montgomery*, ed. Irene Gammel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 222-38. See also our Introductions to *EWLH* and *AGG*.

²² EW-WE Letters, November 15, 1937.

²³ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *The Green Gables Letters: From L.M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber, 1905-1909*. Ed. Wilfrid Eggleston (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 2001). [*Abbreviated as GGL*]

²⁴ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Boston: L.C. Page, 1908).

²⁵ Rodney Sawatsky, *History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition through History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 33-34.

²⁶ "Daniel Henry Bender," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 273.

²⁷ Leonard Gross, "The Doctrinal Era of the Mennonite Church," *MQR* (January 1986): 83.

²⁸ John F. Funk, "Close of Volume XI [of *YPP*]," in John F. Funk Collection (Hist. Mss. 1-1-10 John F. Funk 101/13 "H[erald] O[f] T[ruth] articles" – about Periodicals Young People's Paper)," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana (MCA-G).

²⁹ Ephraim Weber, "Read the Poem," *YPP* (February 1, 1896): 18.

³⁰ *GGL*, 8.

³¹ Ephraim Weber, "Read the Poem," 18.

³² *GGL*, 20.

³³ EW-WE Letters, August 10, 1925.

³⁴ Ephraim Weber, "The Imagination in Devotion," *YPP* (April 10, 1897): 58.

³⁵ Ephraim Weber, "The Craving for Growth," *YPP* (April 24, 1897): 67.

³⁶ *GGL*, 14.

³⁷ Menno S. Steiner, C.K. Hostetler, and Samuel F. Coffman.

³⁸ Letter from C.K. Hostetler to S.F. Coffman, April 4, 1901. Hist. Mss. 1.1.1.2.9, S. F. Coffman Fonds, CK Hostetler letters. Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.

³⁹ I refer to Coffman's diary interchangeably as "diary" and "journal."

⁴⁰ The Samuel F. Coffman collection at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario includes a series of friendly letters written to Coffman from women during his bachelor years: Elsie K. Bender, Alice Bearss, Ida Bergey, M. Elizabeth Brown, Mary Brubacher, Alda Culp, Mary Denlinger, Sarah Funk, Celesta Hartzler, Lucetta High, Barbara Kratz, Berta Lehman, Lizzie Minnich, Debbie Moyer, Louida Nahrgang, Saloma Rittenhouse, Valerie Rittenhouse, Anna Schact, Barbara Sherk, Rebecca & Sarah Sherk, Linda Shantz, Saphrona Sievenpiper, Mollie Snyder, Sarah Wismer, Bertha Zook, Lena Zook.

⁴¹ Samuel F. Coffman, "Diary 1901." March 6. Hist. Mss. 1.1.2.1.4.26., in the Samuel F. Coffman Family Fonds, Mennonite Archives of Ontario. [*Abbreviated as 1901 Diary.*]

⁴² 1901 Diary, March 9.

⁴³ Samuel F. Coffman. Letter to Ella Mann, April 16, 1901, in the Samuel F. Coffman Family Fonds, "Letters to Ella Mann," Hist. Mss. 1.1.1.1.3.2. Mennonite Archives of Ontario. [*Abbreviated as Letters*]

⁴⁴ 1901 Diary, July 12.

⁴⁵ 1901 Diary, April 9.

⁴⁶ Letters, May 4, 1901.

⁴⁷ 1901 Diary, May 11.

⁴⁸ 1901 Diary, July 13.

⁴⁹ 1901 Diary, July 21.

⁵⁰ 1901 Diary, August 19.

⁵¹ 1901 Diary, September 10.

⁵² 1901 Diary, September 24.

⁵³ 1901 Diary, November 8.

⁵⁴ 1901 Diary, November 17.

⁵⁵ Ephraim Weber, "The Bread of Life," *YPP* (February 11, 1901): 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *EWLH*, 63.

⁵⁸ Ephraim Weber, Letter to C.K. Hostetler, December 29, 1898, John F. Funk Collection (Hist. Mss. 1-1-2 John F. Funk Correspondence and Papers). Box 116 (Green) Biographical sketches - Ephraim Weber. Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana (MCA-G).

⁵⁹ *EWLH*, 5.

⁶⁰ *EWLH*, 6.

⁶¹ A-precis, 1.

⁶² A-precis, 2-3.

⁶³ *GGL*, 16.

⁶⁴ A-precis, 32.

⁶⁵ A-precis, 5.

⁶⁶ A-precis, 7-8.

⁶⁷ A-precis, 11.

⁶⁸ A-precis, 12.

⁶⁹ A-precis, 13.

⁷⁰ A-precis, 16.

⁷¹ A-precis, 21.

⁷² A-precis, 28.

⁷³ Ephraim Weber, quoted in *GGL*, 9.

⁷⁴ EW-WE Letters, November 4, 1937.

⁷⁵ EW-WE Letters, February 28, 1945.

⁷⁶ EW-WE Letters, September 5, 1946.

⁷⁷ Paul Tiessen and I are preparing the novel for publication.

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BENJAMIN EBY LECTURESHIP

Benjamin Eby (1785-1853) typified, and possibly inaugurated, Mennonite culture in Upper Canada. He and his wife Mary arrived in Waterloo County from Pennsylvania in 1807. By 1812 he was ordained bishop, and in 1815 he was overseeing construction of the area's first schoolhouse. He provided outstanding leadership in the church and in education throughout his life. The Benjamin Eby Lectureship, established at Conrad Grebel University College in the 1980s, offers faculty members an opportunity to share research and reflections with the broader College and University community.

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