



The Conrad Grebel Review

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Foreword

We are pleased to offer an array of topics in this issue. The four articles present, in order, a systematic dissection of a military parody of Christian discipleship, a critical response to a particular view of John Howard Yoder, a detailed analysis of the logic of a “nonviolent God” argument, and a strong call for a distinctively Anabaptist approach to eco-pacifism. Also included are book reviews on a wide range of subjects.

Our Fall 2011 issue will feature six articles written by authors from various disciplinary and religious perspectives, all focusing on *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures* (Baylor, 2010), a set of addresses given by John Howard Yoder in 1983. The articles reflect a broad scope of interests: the cross-cultural applicability of Yoder’s framework, the relationship between nonviolence and the particularity of the church, the “realism” of Yoder’s account of nonviolent peacemaking, and the relationship between nonviolence and the Jewish concept of Shabbat.

Among the contents of other upcoming issues are the 2010 Bechtel Lectures by Ernst Hamm of York University, entitled “Science and Mennonites in the Dutch Enlightenment,” and the 2011 Bechtel Lectures by Roger Epp, Dean of Augustana College of the University of Alberta, entitled “‘There was no one here when we came’: Overcoming the Settler Problem.”

In 2013 Conrad Grebel University College will mark its fiftieth anniversary, and this journal will mark its thirtieth. We are planning to celebrate both milestones in these pages.

Jeremy M. Bergen
Academic Editor

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Destructive Obedience: US Military Training and Culture as a Parody of Christian Discipleship

Michael J. Iafrate

“War is not an accident. It is the logical outcome of a certain way of life. If we want to attack war, we have to attack that way of life.” – A.J. Muste¹

“The soldier, above all other men, is required to practice the greatest act of religious training—sacrifice.” – General Douglas MacArthur²

Semper Fidelis (“Always faithful”)
– Motto of the United States Marine Corps

Church leaders, even when pronouncing “radical” messages on the topic of war and peace, are often content to allow ethical teaching to float comfortably above concrete reality. For example, the leaders of my own ecclesial communion, the Roman Catholic Church, have since the Second Vatican Council issued inspiring, hopeful messages like “never again war” as well as universalized moral guidelines about the involvement of the faithful in the state’s wars, such as this often-invoked statement from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that soldiering in general can be a noble form of Christian life: “Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace.”³

The tendency in the *Catechism*, in the statements of the US bishops, and in the thought of many Catholic ethicists, is to make universalized claims that are of little help when considering concrete questions in particular contexts.⁴ Pacifist views⁵ are often just as unhelpful, pronouncing for all times and places that violence is “always” wrong and that Christians “may never” serve in the military. The result is that whichever approach Catholics happen to embrace – nonviolence or “just war”⁶ – the universalizing tendency ensures the dominant trends of the culture remain untouched by Christian

reflection, analysis, or critique. For example, “just war” Catholics claim to adhere to the traditional principles of that ethical framework but are largely able to ignore them in real life by relying on the fact that the Catholic Church does not condemn war outright, allowing for war in some circumstances.⁷ Likewise, the universal claims of Catholic pacifists seem too abstractly moralizing and are thus not taken seriously by many Catholics, nor do they always speak to the concrete experience of Catholics in the military. Indeed, few Catholic soldiers, even today, become conscientious objectors.

This paper will resist the very Catholic temptation to make universalized pronouncements about whether military service is *ever* justified for the Christian. Rather, this paper comes out of attention to my own context as an American Roman Catholic theologian educated in Canada in conversation with Mennonite and other “peace church” perspectives. Having been influenced by the emphasis on “discipleship” found in the witness of the peace churches, I will use this theme to interrogate some concrete practices of military training and culture in the contemporary United States as a form of discipleship.⁸ The use of the category of discipleship is a helpful way to discern concrete aspects of military life that often go unnoticed in romanticized depictions in American popular culture and consciousness. Ultimately, I will argue that military training is a process of discipleship, conversion, and deliberate conscience (de-)formation that is fundamentally at odds with Christian discipleship and ultimately destructive to both the soldier and the victims of the US military. Finally, I will suggest that American Catholics can learn much from the peace churches in terms of ecclesial praxis.

This focus on a very contextual, particular issue of military service in the US is important for several reasons. First, it can contribute to specifically Catholic discussions of war and peace in pastorally relevant ways, recovering a lost focus on concrete practices of discipleship and bridging the gap between moral pronouncements from above and the reality “on the ground.” It will also help to correct a reliance in Christian ethics on an idealized view of the military that has been so pervasive in American society, especially since the presidency of Ronald Reagan.⁹ Absent any concrete information about actual military service, discussions on war and peace will remain on this unhelpful, idealized level. Finally, through its focus on particularities,

this contextual analysis will likely resonate with those who observe similar patterns of military discipleship in other contexts, generating insights and norms with more universal relevance through their very groundedness in the concrete. It is in this spirit that I offer these contextual reflections in a Mennonite journal as an act of appreciative cross-cultural and ecumenical sharing.

Discipleship in Catholic Theology and Ethics: Widening the Picture

Unlike the theologies of peace church traditions, Roman Catholic theologians and ethicists are not known for attention to the theme of discipleship and indeed have been criticized in this regard.¹⁰ Whenever discipleship *is* noted as a theme, it is hardly taken as seriously as it should be. For example, in *Love Your Enemies*, Catholic social ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill brings discipleship into Catholic discussions of war and peace, arguing that pacifism is not simply a commitment to an absolute moral rule derived from the Bible or from theoretical frameworks. In contrast to the just war position, a rule-based *theory* that has been adopted throughout Christian history, pacifism is rather an entire *way of life* and a matter of discipleship: “Christian pacifism is essentially a commitment to embody communally and historically the kingdom of God so fully that mercy, forgiveness, and compassion preclude the very contemplation of causing physical harm to another person.”¹¹ It is a “communal practice in imitation of Christ’s servanthood and cross” that is “embedded in a concrete, shared, and converted way of life”¹² in contrast with the just war option, which is merely “analytical” and “not communal in any specific sense” – in other words, *not* a matter of “discipleship.”¹³

Cahill’s description of pacifism as rooted in the life of discipleship is welcome. But her approach is insufficient because of its very narrow understanding of discipleship as simply “following Jesus,” leaving her unable to see, let alone criticize, that military service – and the wider militarized culture – in the United States involves a process of formation that can rightly be called a type of discipleship. Further, it is a type fundamentally at odds with Christian discipleship because of the de-formation that must take place within human beings to enable them to kill other human beings on command. In the context of the American imperialist “War on Terror,” it is necessary to develop more critical perspectives on militarization as

discipleship, something that Cahill's description does not allow.

Cahill's assumption that the concept of discipleship applies only or mainly to following Jesus is a common one.¹⁴ But the idea that there are non-Christian forms of discipleship should be uncontroversial. Throughout the social environment of Jesus, for instance, other religious figures recruited disciples, both within Judaism (e.g., John the Baptist) and within other religions and spiritual movements of the age. Indeed, followers of various religious leaders are frequently referred to as "disciples" today. We also casually refer to adherents of non-religious thinkers and movements as disciples of those movements, but only by way of analogy.

This view of other "discipleships" as merely analogous to "religious" discipleship has much to do with the assumptions of dominant society and mainstream Christianity about what "religion," "spirituality," and "discipleship" mean. As countless thinkers have noted and criticized, White European modernity's creation of the secular sphere has relegated the spiritual to an internal, private, and individual realm.¹⁵ "Common sense" definitions of discipleship have followed this same trajectory. In response, religion scholars such as Sandra Schneiders have sought to recover an understanding of spirituality that includes the entire lived experience of the human person, including bodily, psychological, social and political dimensions.¹⁶ Spirituality in this sense is a fundamental activity of human beings and of human communities in which people strive to integrate their lives according to a particular ultimate value within a historical tradition and a system of symbols.¹⁷ Such views of spirituality include more than what we typically think of as "religious"¹⁸ and make room for "civil religion"¹⁹ and other aspects of life assumed to be "secular."

Scholars of religious studies are often attuned to these inclusive understandings of religion and discipleship. Martin Jaffee, for example, discerns patterns among different cultural-religious traditions, defining discipleship as "a particularly intense mentoring relationship in which a body of knowledge deemed essential to the wise conduct of life is transmitted from the mentor (or master) to the protege (or disciple)."²⁰ Discipleship processes usually involve a hierarchical ordering of power and authority for transmitting the master's way of life such that disciples develop an "intense psychological identification with, and dependence upon, their mentors,"

showing humility, self-effacement, and subordination to them.²¹

Discipleship often takes place in “discipleship communities” analogous to social institutions such as schools in which “the disciple returns to the psychological situation of childhood to be fundamentally reformed as a human being.”²² Processes of discipleship are transformative of persons, “hold[ing] out to the disciple the promise of becoming in some fundamental sense a new being.”²³ Discipleship communities are embedded within larger cultural contexts and often take the form of a subculture, either as a way of life in continuity with the wider culture but living out its values in an “intense and concentrated form” (such as monastic communities), or by taking an “adversarial relationship to the larger cultural and religious tradition” as countercultures.²⁴

Such an inclusive definition could be criticized for being too broad and for neglecting the distinctive aspects of discipleship as understood by Christians, that is, the distinctiveness of following Jesus. But broadening the view can help rediscover what is distinctive about *Christian* understandings. The critical edge of Christian discipleship can be restored, allowing Christians to discern how following Jesus can come into conflict with other ways of life at odds with patterns of Christian discipleship. In a time and context in which willingness to kill for the nation-state is assumed and “Catholic identity is simply *merged* into American identity, as if the two are perfectly harmonious [with] absolutely no conflict between them,”²⁵ this kind of discernment is needed because the lives of human beings are at stake.

Practices of US Military Discipleship

Assuming Jaffee’s inclusive view of discipleship, it becomes easy to see that US military training and militarized culture are a “way of life” and a form of discipleship. With Jaffee’s description in the background, I will sketch some basic practices of US military discipleship, focusing on how military training (de-)forms the conscience of the recruit. A sketch is all I can provide here. For example, I will not deal with the role of narrative in the process of military discipleship, even though narrative theologies remind us that “narrative is crucial for understanding human life”²⁶ because individuals and communities are shaped by the stories they tell and believe about themselves. Certainly citizens of the United States and members of

the military are story-formed communities.²⁷ However, I will follow the lead of Jesuit ethicist John Kavanaugh, who argues that, despite the insights of narrative theology and virtue ethics, ethics has become “de-personed” through overemphasizing these categories.²⁸ An essential task of ethics, he says, is to “investigate just what kind of being the human being is and to examine what human beings uniquely introduce to the world,” grounding ethics in the human person.²⁹ What makes us unique is that we are *ethical* beings who are not “mere hapless creatures of culture and passive victims of history” but who can reflectively “mount a self-critical questioning of our particular space and time.”³⁰

Thus my stress will not be on how narratives about the US military conflict with narratives of the Christian faith, but on what the practices of the US military do to the concrete persons shaped by them, especially their effect on the conscience that Kavanaugh sees as the ground of the human person. “Conscience” in Roman Catholic theology has three dimensions: (1) “a *characteristic* of human persons whereby they experience themselves as accountable for their behavior”; (2) “a process of discernment whereby they attempt to discover whether a particular action ought or ought not to be performed”; and (3) the resolution of the process of discernment through a judgment of right and wrong in a particular instance.³¹ As we will see, US military discipleship affects and deforms the conscience of the recruit on all three levels, but at its most successful it attempts to extinguish the recruit’s conscience by effecting deliberate change on the first, most basic level.

This choice of emphasis on personhood and conscience is no mere arbitrary methodological option. Although other aspects are important, it provides for a radical critique of concrete military practice, “radical” because it “gets to the root” of why US military discipleship is a rival or parody of Christian discipleship. Military discipleship ultimately seems to say, “Believe or reject whatever stories you want about ‘America,’ we are going to act directly upon your mind and body through transformative practices.” Taking US military training seriously as a process of discipleship radically shaping human conscience is necessary for exposing its destructive, life-denying processes as incompatible with Christian discipleship.

The US military shapes the consciences of recruits by fostering a complex set of “military virtues” through practices of initiation in order

to produce particular patterns of action. I will limit my discussion to three: group loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice. Military historian and journalist Gwynne Dyer calls the practices instilling these virtues “a conversion process in an almost religious sense.”³² The depth of this process is rarely seen for what it is, a “brief but intense indoctrination whose purpose is not really to teach the recruits basic military skills but rather to change their values and their loyalties.”³³ Primary among these changes is the “revers[al of] the moral training of a lifetime,” i.e., the notion that killing is wrong.³⁴ Each of the military virtues discussed here is ordered toward the sole purpose of enabling the soldier to kill.

Group loyalty is a primary virtue of the military discipleship community. At boot camp recruits are “fundamentally re-embodied”³⁵ individually and communally in order to form the group into an unbreakable social body. First, they are physically set apart where they “observe an ascetic vocation”³⁶ that mimics Christian monasteries through codes of purity and cleanliness and special vows of obedience.³⁷ In the process they give up their civilian clothing, receive uniforms and identical haircuts, and are taught common responses to basic commands, “surrender[ing] . . . all the physical evidence of their individual civilian identities.”³⁸ By living, sleeping, eating, and even being rewarded and punished together, they begin to function as a group, identifying with one another as a collective fighting unit³⁹ “hostile to outside invaders and insiders who fail to act as group members.”⁴⁰ In addition to official drills and “ceremonial rituals” or “liturgies,” bonding also takes place through unofficial initiation practices designed to humiliate soldiers who have difficulty “fitting in.”⁴¹ Recruits who question this culture of conformity are charged with disloyalty that will leave the group vulnerable.⁴² The injury or death of fellow soldiers in his unit becomes the soldier’s greatest fear.⁴³

This culture of fear and absolute group loyalty lays the ground for the virtue of *unquestioning obedience*.⁴⁴ Physical tests of strength and endurance and regular inspections of dress and appearance contribute to an “unquestioning submission to military authority”⁴⁵ in which “orders have to be obeyed automatically and instantly.”⁴⁶ Obedience is strengthened and made automatic through positive reinforcement connected to firing drills.⁴⁷ Finally, obedience is deepened through repeated systemic abuse by one’s

superiors which reduces recruits “to a position of helplessness and need.”⁴⁸ Again, this pattern of hierarchy and submission mirrors the dynamics Jaffee discerns in discipleship communities across various religions and social groups.

A third key virtue is *sacrifice*, the soldier’s willingness both to sacrifice himself and to “sacrifice” others, i.e., those he or she will be taught to kill. This willingness is a relatively easy virtue to instill, as it flows from the group camaraderie formed in basic training, building on pre-existing ideals of self-sacrifice learned from American culture and religious traditions. Idealistic images of the soldier dying for his country are presented to Americans from a young age; military training merely taps into and intensifies these ideals. What requires more effort and more intentional practices of discipleship is the willingness to kill other human beings. Despite popular images of virtuous, self-sacrificial soldiers, the ultimate goal of military training is not self-sacrifice and the death of soldiers, but the killing of others on command. Militaries win wars by killing, not by sacrificing themselves.

The US military has perfected the art of teaching soldiers to kill on command without reflection. Until fairly recently, it was not widely understood that a real conversion is necessary for soldiers to kill automatically and effectively, as it had been assumed that killing is something ordinary people are capable of doing in the context of war.⁴⁹ But as military writers such as Dave Grossman and Gwynne Dyer have pointed out, human beings have a built-in resistance to killing made up of a “combination of instinctive, rational, environmental, hereditary, cultural, and social factors,”⁵⁰ and research shows this resistance has prevented efficient killing in the earlier wars in US history.⁵¹ While distance between soldier and victim (such as in the bombing of far-off targets) creates a “buffer” protecting soldiers from the visceral knowledge that they are killing human beings,⁵² the need to make them “get over” killing is nevertheless “now recognized as a centrally important part of the training process.”⁵³ “These days soldiers are taught, very specifically, to kill.”⁵⁴

The ability to kill human beings is fostered by the community formation and sense of accountability to the unit generated in training, a process of extreme desensitization to the act of killing, and a routine of dehumanization of the enemy. Accountability to the unit, combined with the anonymity that

comes from killing as part of a group rather than as a solitary individual, enables killing to come more easily.⁵⁵ Killing is normalized through training exercises in which relentless violence is encouraged by drill instructors,⁵⁶ collective chants and songs such as “kill, kill, kill,” and gruesome rhetoric used in weapons instruction.⁵⁷ Soldiers are also encouraged to dehumanize and demonize the “enemy,” turning killing from their viewpoint into a morally neutral act.

Soldiers come to see themselves as killing expendable creatures of another race or class rather than human beings like themselves.⁵⁸ Combined with the repetition and positive reinforcement of target practice in which practice and “real kills” in combat become indistinguishable,⁵⁹ these practices teach soldiers to kill automatically, on command, without reflection or guilt. In the process, they must develop “denial defense mechanisms” or the ability to rationalize and accept their actions. Those who do not will often become victims of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁶⁰ This has led even some military officials and thinkers to emphasize that the military’s increasing ability to create human “killing machines” is a tremendously dangerous power that should not be wielded lightly.⁶¹

This examination of the virtues and practices of US military discipleship clearly shows how such training severely damages the soldier’s conscience on the first two levels described by Timothy O’Connell: the sense of feeling accountable for one’s actions, and the process of discernment by which one chooses right and wrong. Military training is determined to extinguish the sense of accountability, to cause the soldier to bypass moral reflection – “I was just following orders” – and to de-form the conscience at the level of concrete decision-making. Theological ethicist Samuel Wells likens decision-making in the Christian life to the act of improvisation, not simply following a script embedded in Christian narratives but creative living that is faithful to, but different from, the narratives.⁶² In William Spohn’s terms, living out of one’s conscience means learning how to live “by analogy,” imitating the story of Jesus (the “prime analogate”) in ways both similar to, and different from, him by improvisation.⁶³

Although soldiers’ training teaches them to kill on command, it also shapes conscience by encouraging the improvisation of killing practices. As Major Peter Kilner of the US Army writes, “military leaders must move beyond reflexive training. The US Army requires soldiers to make life-

or-death decisions in the absence of fire commands or obvious stimuli. In operations other than war, soldiers must make judgment calls that cannot be trained in the traditional sense.”⁶⁴ Soldiers have little choice, however, but to engage in improvisational killing based on the dehumanization and desensitization they experienced in their training, backed up by the military law’s severe punishments for disobedience. This kind of improvised mass killing in war has been documented by journalist Chris Hedges,⁶⁵ who shows how soldiers bypass moral reflection and “improvise” dehumanization, often going beyond the “necessary” killing of battle and into the realm of deliberate murder and massacres: “These soldiers and Marines . . . can instantly give or deprive human life, and with this power they became sick and demented. The moral universe is turned upside down. All human beings are used as objects.”⁶⁶ He recalls one particularly gruesome episode from the US-led war in Iraq:

At one point the unit was surrounded by an angry crowd protesting the occupation. Mejia and his squad opened fire on an Iraqi holding a grenade, riddling the man’s body with bullets. Mejia checked his clip afterwards and determined that he fired 11 rounds into the young man. Units, he said, nonchalantly opened fire in crowded neighborhoods with heavy M-240 Bravo machine guns, AT-4 launchers and Mark 19’s, a machine gun that spits out grenades.

“The frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us,” Mejia writes, “led to tactics that seemed designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them.”

He watched soldiers from his unit abuse the corpses of Iraqi dead. Mejia related how, in one incident, soldiers laughed as an Iraqi corpse fell from the back of a truck.

“Take a picture of me and this m-----f---r,” one of the soldiers who had been in Mejia’s squad in third platoon said, putting his arm around the corpse.

The shroud fell away from the body revealing a young man wearing only his pants. There was a bullet hole in his chest.

“Damn, they really f---d you up, didn’t they!?” the soldier laughed.⁶⁷

It is almost impossible to keep up with similar reports as the War on Terror continues. Early on, such occurrences were generally reported only by alternative media sources such as Democracy Now!,⁶⁸ but the sheer volume of reports and growing dissatisfaction with the wars have caused even mainstream outlets to feel compelled to report on massacres by US soldiers. As a result, the findings of whistleblowing groups such as WikiLeaks have become more widely known by the general population.⁶⁹

Finally, military life is not isolable from the wider American culture often described as “militarized.” Its signs are clear and fairly well-known: the overwhelming support that US warmaking receives from citizens,⁷⁰ the extent and reach of the “military-industrial complex,”⁷¹ and the presence of the military in entertainment media and popular culture.⁷² Andrew Bacevich has tracked the militarization of US culture and the normalization of war as politics, industry, and culture gradually became centered on “planning, preparing, and waging war,” creating a war-centered society.⁷³ Soldiers have increasingly come to be seen as the exemplars of American life:

Since the end of the Cold War, opinion polls surveying public attitudes to national institutions have regularly ranked the armed services first. While confidence in the executive branch, the Congress, the media, and even organized religion is diminishing, confidence in the military continues to climb. . . . Americans fearful that the rest of society may be teetering on the brink of moral collapse console themselves with the thought that the armed services remain a repository of traditional values and old-fashioned virtue.⁷⁴

A 2003 poll of US soldiers revealed that two-thirds of them agreed with such sentiments, believing they have “higher moral standards” than the rest of society.⁷⁵ Bacevich observes that honoring soldiers is virtually obligatory, and refusal to “support the troops” amounts to an “unforgivable sin.”⁷⁶ He also notes a paradox: since the end of the Vietnam War and the institution of a voluntary military force, American elites have left military service to poor, Black, and/or Latina/o Americans and mostly “admire soldiers from a safe distance.”⁷⁷ Soldiers have come to be seen as an elite class of virtuous exemplars “culturally and politically set apart from the

rest of society”⁷⁸ who nevertheless represent the supreme manifestation of various American values.⁷⁹

This idealized military class, distinct from the average citizen, mixed with the pervasive individualized mentality of American gun culture⁸⁰ and systems of patriarchal and racist domination are only a few aspects of a society drenched in what Walter Wink has called the “myth of redemptive violence.”⁸¹ The violence of American society, centering on this myth, is infinitely complex, featuring values and attitudes in conflict with each other, but the basic attitudes of American nationalistic civil religion are powerful forces influencing what average Americans believe about their country. Although the militarization of society tends to penetrate and affect the whole, there remains a perpetual honoring of soldiers as a special class of violent exemplar-disciples.⁸²

De-formation of Conscience as Dehumanization

Military training practices have been designed and refined over time to act radically on the recruit’s conscience on all three levels distinguished by O’Connell, including perhaps especially the basic human characteristic of feeling accountable and responsible for one’s actions. Indeed, the ideal result of the training is that the soldier will bypass moral reflection and suppress any feelings of unease that may arise in carrying out orders, particularly when it involves killing human beings.

Although this process may seem like “common sense” to many American Catholics, something necessary for militaries to accomplish their missions effectively, military training comes into profound conflict with official Roman Catholic teaching on conscience. Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, states

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.⁸³

The notion that the capacity for ethical reflection gives human beings dignity is grounded philosophically by John Kavanaugh, who contends that our reflective capacities “distance and free us from unquestioning passive acceptance. They liberate us from a forcibly imposed world.”⁸⁴ Following Aquinas, he says that as ethical beings, we have the ability either to “freely say *yes* to the intrinsic value of beings in the world”⁸⁵ or to negate the goodness of existence, a negation that we call moral evil. Every conscious act is a “yes” or “no” to the human actor and to the world. Our actions “reveal the stance, attitude, and free responsibility of a human agent.”⁸⁶

Acting against one’s conscience, even if it is in error, is considered sin in Catholic teaching: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself.”⁸⁷ Each person has a right to act according to conscience and must not be forced to act contrary to it.⁸⁸ Of course, the right to follow one’s conscience entails the duty to form one’s conscience, a process considered a “lifelong task” informed by the Word of God, prayer, the “witness or advice of others,” the teaching of the Church, and so on.⁸⁹ Part of this duty is the integration of the duties of Christian conscience with those of “secular” life. No part of life can be separated from Christian conscience.⁹⁰

Actions flowing from conscience do not merely reflect pure intentions but are influenced by forces external to us; for example, by the information we have regarding the action. Such influences and distraction can lead to a misinformed or even deformed conscience. “It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of *interiority* is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection.”⁹¹ According to Catholic teaching, ignorance of the good that is not the fault of the moral subject diminishes the person’s responsibility for acts of an erroneous conscience. But the person is responsible if he or she “takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.”⁹²

John Kavanaugh discusses this “blinding” of conscience: “Moral judgments ... can be misinformed. They can be formed by distortions, lies, incomplete information, ignorance, or propaganda. Like any judgment, they can be distorted by fear, force, terror, deprivation, addiction, or psychological

distress.”⁹³ These distortions reach their extreme when denying the objective value of the human person becomes embedded in cultures and traditions through “corporate behavioral practices,” such as when mis/disinformation is “corporately orchestrated to repress the truth.”⁹⁴ One might immediately think of Nazi Germany, but Kavanaugh accuses the United States too: “It happens in our own nation as well – whenever, because of cultural propaganda, we are willing to render the human person expendable in the name of our own self-interest.”⁹⁵

For Kavanaugh, the cultural relativism leading to the denial of the dignity of persons can be challenged only “if there is a foundation for ethics other than the heritage one finds oneself lodged in.”⁹⁶ That foundation is the human person. “We cannot ‘do’ ethics or ‘be’ ethical if at the same time we negate personal existence.”⁹⁷ After establishing this foundation, he formulates the primary law of ethics: “Affirm the reality of personal existence;” that is, love persons and love personal existence. Put negatively, it is “Do not treat persons as non-persons. Do not reduce persons to the status of an object.”⁹⁸

Because the very impulse to be ethical affirms the personal reality from which ethics springs . . . *one cannot be faithful to the moral universe in doing any act that in itself negates personhood in oneself or another.* Fidelity to human personhood, the affirmation of the intrinsic value of persons and adherence to the truth of personal moral dignity, requires that we never reduce a human person to the condition of being a nonperson, that we not negate the personhood of ourselves and others, that we not treat a person as a mere thing or object. . . . To be willing to kill a human person is to be willing to kill the foundation of ethics itself. It is to disengage oneself from the moral universe.⁹⁹

This depersonalization is precisely the process involved in military training. Through training that inspires unquestioning obedience divorced from moral reflection, soldiers are dehumanized so they can dehumanize others on command in the name of national interests. As Jessica Wolfendale describes it, “Killing is experienced literally as a thoughtless action. . . . This training therefore not only modifies combatants’ emotional responses to

killing . . . but aims to remove the act of killing from the moral awareness of military personnel.”¹⁰⁰ In the moment, killing is not seen as an act with moral significance, and any moral qualms that the soldier might have come after the fact.¹⁰¹ Military and cultural norms justify the removal of the soldiers’ consciences by claiming they are not really responsible for their actions since they are only “following orders.” Despite these claims, the idea that they need not worry about their acts and can follow orders “in good conscience” simply does not square with a Catholic theology of conscience. When seen for what it truly is, military training is a process of moral “blinding” or conscience de-formation, not moral conscience formation. And no matter what justifications are made, Kavanaugh insists that our actions still belong to us and we are still responsible for them.¹⁰² “To give up our conscience is to give up our moral judgment itself. It is to give up our moral freedom. It is to give up the ethical life. It is to reject personal life,” that is, to give up what it means to be a human person.¹⁰³

Wolfendale notes how this insight exposes the falsity of military rhetoric about the soldier’s “moral integrity,” as it is precisely the systematic removal of that integrity which makes the recruit an effective killer.¹⁰⁴ Rather than instilling *reflective obedience*, as the rhetoric brags, that would allow soldiers to disobey illegal and immoral orders, the military instills a perverted, detached *unreflective obedience* that in the end amounts to *destructive obedience*.¹⁰⁵ “Far from training military personnel to be reflective moral agents . . . military training at both elite and basic levels not only inhibits the expression of the capacity for reflective moral agency; it undermines the capacity itself and further entrenches the dispositions of destructive obedience.”¹⁰⁶

Kavanaugh asserts that “if we desire to *do* ethics,” to be ethical, “we cannot repress or negate the very personhood that drives us to do ethics in the first place.”¹⁰⁷ The negation of personhood by intentionally destroying, if temporarily, the capacity for moral reflection is fundamental to the functioning of US military life. As Emmanuel Charles McCarthy and John Carmody have it,

To say, “I will not kill a fellow human being,” is an expression of consciousness flowing from a profoundly catholic, empathic awareness of the “other” as “self.” To say, “I will kill a fellow

human being,” is the consequence of an external, patterned, repetitive, cultural and parochial undermining of the pre-existing human faculty and tendency toward empathy, by means of intentional information-deprivation or distortion. The “other” becomes an abstraction that is less than “self.”¹⁰⁸

The “empathic awareness of the other as self” is arguably the central impulse according to which Christian disciples improvise lives analogous to the life of Jesus. While the parables and the narrative of Jesus’ life do not offer a simple blueprint for action, they analogically imply “distinctive behavioral consequences,”¹⁰⁹ namely by “call[ing] people to enter into the reign of God by doing the sorts of things that [Jesus] did with the same motives.”¹¹⁰ Although there is a certain openness to the many ways disciples will follow Jesus in various contexts, the particularity of the person of Jesus grounds and sets limits to the interpretations that could be imagined. “The figure of Jesus cannot support any and every interpretation, because he was a particular person with a specific way of being human. The universality of the story must be grounded in its concreteness. The Christian moral imperative is not simply ‘Be human,’ but ‘Be human in the way in which Jesus Christ is human.’”¹¹¹

The parables, words, actions, and especially the cross of Jesus “exercise a normative role because they rule in certain dispositions and rule out others. They make some actions seem appropriate and others inappropriate.”¹¹² In our Christian lives, we are “called to be analogies of the prime analogate, the life of Jesus Christ”¹¹³ and the values and virtues to which we hope to be conformed must be Christocentric, “tak[ing] seriously what Jesus took seriously,” i.e., “inclusive love, compassionate service, radical trust in God, gratitude, forgiveness, courage, a thirst for justice, nonviolence, freedom from anxiety, dependence on God, obedience.”¹¹⁴

To cultivate these virtues and values, Christian practices are oriented toward widening our empathy beyond the myopic limitations of our moral perception.¹¹⁵ Unlike the practices of military discipleship, geared toward intensifying moral myopia and extinguishing empathy, Christian practices such as the Eucharist and intercessory prayer widen our moral perception, inviting us to see what was formerly invisible.¹¹⁶ These practices invite us into deeper moral awareness and broader solidarity with the human family

that is infinitely wider than that of any nation-state or empire. Exclusive allegiance to the American nation-state, especially the uncritical kind fostered by military culture, represents a national sectarianism at odds with the ever-expanding solidarities demanded by Christian discipleship.¹¹⁷ And just as nationalistic conceptions of the nation-state represent a heretical parody of the social bonds of the Church,¹¹⁸ the process of conversion embodied in US soldiering represents a perverse parody of Christian discipleship.

Military discipleship is a cycle of dehumanizing conversion that seems condemned always to end in death,¹¹⁹ making authentic Christian life impossible. In the context of the United States today, Christians should refuse military service as a way of life incompatible with Christianity. Insofar as militaries in other national contexts bear resemblance to the dynamics of discipleship demonstrated in the American military, Christians in those contexts may come to the same conclusion. In the words of McCarthy and Carmody, “Be not deluded. Abstractions can kill. Here the battlefield is the human mind. All is won or lost there. All nations, all militaries, all institutional religions, all corporations know this – and Jesus knows this, which is why His first public word was *metanoiete*, ‘change your minds.’”¹²⁰

Toward an Ecclesial Praxis of Counter-Recruitment and Reconciliation

This final section suggests necessary changes in ecclesial praxis that can contribute to the liberation of current soldiers, their victims, potential targets of military recruiting, and citizens of the United States at large who are constantly bombarded with the mythology of military civil religion.

Practices can be implemented at various levels in the churches. At the level of official church teaching, ecclesial leaders must not only make universalized pronouncements on war but offer practical pastoral guidance based on real-life circumstances, especially the actually existing process of discipleship that takes place in recruiting and forming soldiers. On all levels, the churches can support counter-recruitment movements from the distinct perspective of Christian discipleship.¹²¹ Ecclesial high schools and universities can refuse to welcome recruiters to their campuses and publicly deal with the consequences, which may include loss of federal funding.

Churches not already doing so can offer scholarships to students who lack the financial means to attend college and feel pressured to join the military to obtain the perceived monetary rewards, or who opt not to register for selective service based on their objection to war, paying particular attention to how class and race factor into military recruitment patterns.¹²² “Mainline” churches must recover a robust understanding of discipleship, learning especially from the peace churches, that would enable them to resist rival, destructive forms of discipleship and give witness to a way of life animated by one’s dying and rising to new life in Jesus.

In service to current soldiers, churches can support denominational organizations such as the Catholic Peace Fellowship¹²³ as it counsels soldiers on their particular churches’ teachings on specific wars, and give assistance to those seeking conscientious objector status. Given the uphill struggle in mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, however, it will be difficult to persuade soldiers to leave the military completely. But these churches should make clear that discipleship still makes radical demands even for those who cannot immediately follow the path of pacifism. Soldiers who take Christian discipleship seriously deserve concrete moral guidance in which just war teaching is used as a pastoral device resituated within the language and dynamics of peacemaking discipleship. Use of just war teaching for the personal guidance of soldiers, as opposed to merely a set of criteria for heads of states, will require serious consideration of selective conscientious objection – a refusal to fight in particular wars rather than an aversion to all war – as a real possibility for the individual Christian soldier.

Because US law does not currently allow for selective conscientious objection, the churches should advocate for the right of soldiers to refuse to fight in particular wars without penalty, perhaps by providing them with a “temporarily non-deployable” status. The US Catholic Church’s Archdiocese for the Military Services should be particularly active in this regard.¹²⁴ The pastoral use of just war criteria must also reconnect these teachings to the custom of confession and penance, as was the church’s practice in earlier periods, as John Howard Yoder reminds us.¹²⁵ Churches can institute processes of post-conflict counseling for soldiers returning from war that attempt to help them unlearn the psychological effects of military training

within a context fostering the sacramental embodiment of reconciliation with God and with the church.

Reconciliatory practices would not only benefit the soldier; mainline churches themselves need the healing, reconciliation, and transformation that can come from taking the soldier's experience seriously.¹²⁶ None of these practices, however, should be isolated from the radical challenge that Christian discipleship should pose for US soldiers and that questions the authenticity of their "vocation" and urges them to lay down their arms.

Discussion of ecclesial praxis surrounding these issues cannot neglect the recent suggestion posed by theologians such as Gerald Schlabach and A. James Reimer calling for a reframing of the pacifism vs. just war debate through a new theory of "just policing." According to such arguments, it is not possible for Christians to engage in war but it is possible, and even necessary, for them to engage in state *police* activity for the sake of "civil order."¹²⁷ I am skeptical of such suggestions, as they often allow for the same patterns of conscience (de-)formation geared toward the killing of human persons discussed in this essay. In earlier issues of this journal, Andy Alexis-Baker has persuasively shown the problems with the "just policing" approach.¹²⁸ Policing in the US, as elsewhere, has become increasingly less distinguishable from military activity. As I write these words, for example, reports are emerging about police brutality during the protests of the G20 summits in Pittsburgh in September 2009 and in Toronto in 2010. Such cases are certainly not rare. Even more disturbing are reports of the trial of a former Chicago police lieutenant who oversaw the systematic torture of more than 100 black men over two decades.¹²⁹ If discussion of "just policing" as a permissible option for Christians is to avoid merely placing a new name on the same old practices of violence, it will have to remain committed to Christian nonviolence, defining "policing" in terms of nonviolent conflict resolution.

The path of discipleship, following Jesus, fosters the ability to improvise a life of radical transnational solidarity with the human family and a profound reverence for the dignity of the human person made in God's image and likeness. Taking the narratives, virtues, and practices of Christian discipleship seriously deepens that reverence and leads Christians to say "no" to rival discipleships denying this dignity in themselves and others.

The issue of war and peace is one area of ethics in which mainline churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, need to recover the ability to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of discipleship, joining the cloud of witnesses to Christian nonviolence present throughout the Body of Christ. By doing so, churches in the US context can radically challenge “the capacities of American power projection”¹³⁰ and offer a stronger witness to another way of life in which the myth of redemptive violence is exposed and rejected in all its forms.¹³¹

Notes

¹ Quoted in Aimee Allison and David Solnit, *Army of None: Strategies to Counter Military Recruitment, End War, and Build a Better World* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 177.

² Quoted in Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 100.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, updated ed. (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1995), no. 2310. Compare also *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 502: “*The requirements of legitimate defense justify the existence in States of armed forces, the activity of which should be at the service of peace. Those who defend the security and freedom of a country, in such a spirit, make an authentic contribution to peace. Everyone who serves in the armed forces is concretely called to defend good, truth and justice in the world. Many are those who, in such circumstances, have sacrificed their lives for these values and in defence of innocent lives*” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2004], emphasis in original).

⁴ Liberationist theologians and ethicists such as Traci West argue that simply beginning with universal ethical claims will make those claims less relevant and easily dismissible. But the more attention given to the concrete and the particular, the more universal relevance those ethical claims will have. See Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 41-2.

⁵ On the variety of Christian pacifisms, see John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971).

⁶ The post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church has upheld both just war and pacifist positions as compatible with the Gospel.

⁷ William T. Cavanaugh, “At Odds with the Pope: Legitimate Authority and Just Wars,” *Commonweal* 130.10 (23 May 2003): 11-13.

⁸ Military recruitment practices in the US, also relevant to an exploration of military “discipleship,” cannot be explored here because of limited space.

⁹ See chapter four of Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans*

Are Seduced by War (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 235.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Even an entry on discipleship in a recent, intentionally inter-religious volume discusses only following Jesus. See Regina A. Boisclair, "Discipleship," in *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 353-54.

¹⁵ See, for example, Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, eds., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2002) and chapter one of William Cavanaugh's *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002). Three classic Catholic critiques of this dualistic approach to the religious and secular spheres are found in Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William D. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); and Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Fundamental Practical Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980).

¹⁶ Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50.4 (1989): 679.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 684.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 693.

¹⁹ Robert Bellah famously described civil religion in America as the "apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people. Like all religions, it has suffered various deformations and demonic distortions." See "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96.1 (Winter 1967), available at http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.

²⁰ Martin Jaffee, "Discipleship," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 2360.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2361.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Michael J. Baxter, "Dispelling the 'We' Fallacy from the Body of Christ: The Task of Catholics in a Time of War," in *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 110-11.

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, "Introduction: Why Narrative?" in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

²⁷ Emphasis on the category of narrative in the theological analysis of American history and

culture is characteristic of the work of Stanley Hauerwas: “‘America’ names for me sets of some of the most powerful stories that grip our lives” (*Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004], 147). Hauerwas and those influenced by him level important critiques against the mythological character of US narratives, but tend to reduce such narratives to a singular “American narrative.”

In addition to Hauerwas, my thinking on the power of the narratives of US civil religion has been influenced by such works as Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*; Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*, revised and updated ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995); Ronald Wright, *What is America?: A Short History of the New World Order* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2008); Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *America, Amerikkka: Elect Nation and Imperial Violence* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2007); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); work by William T. Cavanaugh, “Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism,” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 3.2 (Fall 2005): 261-80, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” *Liturgy* 20.1 (2005): 25-30, and “The Empire of the Empty Shrine: American Imperialism and the Church,” *Cultural Encounters* 2.2 (Summer 2006): 7-19; and the witness of the diverse expressions of liberation and postcolonial theologies.

²⁸ John F. Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons? Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2001), 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹ Timothy E. O’Connell, “Conscience,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 199-200. The *Catechism*’s discussion of conscience also suggests a threefold understanding: “Conscience is the judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. *In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be right and just.*” (*Catechism*, no. 1778).

³² Gwynne Dyer, *War*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004), 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸ Dyer, *War*, 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁰ Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 110.

⁴¹ Jessica Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 132.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴³ Chris Hedges, *What Every Person Should Know About War* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 78.

⁴⁴ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 134.

⁴⁵ Dyer, *War*, 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

⁴⁷ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 137.

⁴⁸ Dyer, *War*, 42-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁰ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 39.

⁵¹ See extended discussions of this research in Dyer, *War* and Grossman, *On Killing*.

⁵² Dyer, *War*, 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Grossman, *On Killing*, 149-55.

⁵⁶ Dyer, *War*, 58.

⁵⁷ Take, for example, this excerpt from a lecture on mines at Parris Island in 1982: “Well, first off, what is a mine? A mine is nothing more, privates, than an explosive or chemical substance made to destroy and kill the enemy. . . . You want to rip his eyeballs out, you want to tear apart his love machine, you want to destroy him, privates, you don’t want to have nothing left of him. You want to send him home in a Glad Bag to his mommy!” (Dyer, *War*, 59).

⁵⁸ Grossman, *On Killing*, 156-70.

⁵⁹ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 137-8; Hedges, *What Every Person*, 72.

⁶⁰ Hedges, *What Every Person*, 74. See also chapter 5, “The Change is Forever,” in Daniel William Hallock, *Hell, Healing, and Resistance: Veterans Speak* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1998), 89-107.

⁶¹ This is the whole premise of Grossman’s book *On Killing*, which is extended into a critique of the desensitization to killing that is taking place in American society in general.

⁶² Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 65.

⁶³ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 50-60.

⁶⁴ Peter Kilner, “Military Leaders’ Obligation to Justify Killing in War,” *Military Review* 82.2 (March-April 2002): 29.

⁶⁵ In addition to his countless writings in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, see his powerful and much-cited book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

⁶⁶ Chris Hedges, “The Death Mask of War,” *Adbusters* 72 (June-July 2007), available at http://adbusters.org/the_magazine/72/The_Death_Mask_of_War.html.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See <http://www.democracynow.org>.

⁶⁹ See the WikiLeaks website at <http://wikileaks.org> as well as Amy Goodman, “Collateral Murder in Iraq,” *Truthdig*, 6 April 2010, available at http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/collateral_murder_in_iraq_20100406; “‘This Is How These Soldiers Were Trained to Act’—

Veteran of Military Unit Involved in 2007 Baghdad Helicopter Shooting Says Incident Is Part of Much Larger Problem,” *Democracy Now!: The War and Peace Report*, 12 April 2010, available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/12/this_is_how_these_soldiers_were; Amy Goodman, “WikiLeak’s Afghan War Diary,” *Truthdig*, 27 July 2010, available at http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/wikileaks_afghan_war_diary_20100727; “The New Pentagon Papers: WikiLeaks Releases 90,000+ Secret Military Documents Painting Devastating Picture of Afghanistan War,” *Democracy Now!: The War and Peace Report*, 26 July 2010, available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/7/26/the_new_pentagon_papers_wikileaks_releases.

⁷⁰ When US military action begins, an estimated 65-85 percent of Americans support the war. The number decreases as the war rages on and American casualties are compiled. See Hedges, *What Every Person*, 3.

⁷¹ In addition to 1.4 million active duty personnel, the US military directly employs about 627,000 civilians and the defense industry employs 3 million Americans. In total, 3.5 percent of the US labor force is military-related. (Hedges, *What Every Person*, 5).

⁷² See Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*; Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, “The Imperial Warrior in Hollywood: Rambo and Beyond,” *New Political Science* 30.4 (2008): 565-78.

⁷³ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 33.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁷⁹ The militarization of society is only one part of a larger dynamic of a discipleship of domination in American society. Feminist theologians such as Gloria Albrecht have rightly criticized Hauerwas and others for a narrow understanding of violence that denounces Christian participation in warmaking but overlooks other kinds of violence involved in patriarchal capitalist societies, particularly violence against women committed by men. The creation of peaceable communities must involve more than just the renunciation of war and soldiering and must see the connection of these realities to socially constructed ideals of masculinity (Gloria H. Albrecht, *The Character of Our Communities: Toward an Ethic of Liberation for the Church* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 158). The process of military training works, in part, by building on ideas recruits already have about masculinity that are found in American culture. As Dyer notes, this sexist “raw material” is widespread among teenage boys who typically have “a fair amount of aggression, a strong tendency to hang around in groups, and an absolutely desperate desire to fit in” (Dyer, *War*, 42, 52).

⁸⁰ Joan Burbick, *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture and American Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

⁸¹ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*.

⁸² Chris Hedges writes: “We make our heroes out of clay. We laud their gallant deeds and give them uniforms with colored ribbons on their chest for the acts of violence they committed or endured. They are our false repositories of glory and honor, of power, of self-righteousness, of patriotism and self-worship, all that we want to believe about ourselves. They are our

plaster saints of war, the icons we cheer to defend us and make us and our nation great. They are the props of our civic religion, our love of power and force, our belief in our right as a chosen nation to wield this force against the weak and rule. This is our nation's idolatry of itself" ("The Death Mask of War").

⁸³ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

⁸⁴ John Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons?* 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁸⁷ *Catechism*, no. 1790.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1782.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, nos. 1783-85.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 912.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1779.

⁹² *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16, quoted in the *Catechism*, no. 1791.

⁹³ Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons?* 100.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119. For a shorter version of Kavanaugh's argument, see "Killing Persons, Killing Ethics," *America* 177.2 (19 July 1997): 24.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 139.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 139-40.

¹⁰² Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons?* 100.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 140-41.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 5. Wolfendale's reformist approach holds out hope that this destructive obedience might be curbed through an extensive rethinking and revision of training practices that would include formation in reflective obedience and the morality of killing. I do not share the optimism that US militaries can be reformed such that this aspect of training would be removed. See Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 189-92.

¹⁰⁷ Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons?* 1.

¹⁰⁸ Emmanuel Charles McCarthy and John J. Carmody, "Killing Abstractions: The Battlefield of the Human Mind," *The Sign of Peace: Journal of the Catholic Peace Fellowship* 8.2 (Spring 2009): 14-5, available at http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/downloads/SPRING_2009.pdf.

¹⁰⁹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 68.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹³ Ibid., 152.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 100-12.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 112-19.

¹¹⁷ Michael L. Budde, "Selling America, Restricting the Church," in *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*, ed. Wes Avram (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 81.

¹¹⁸ On the nation-state as a parody of the Church, see the work of William Cavanaugh, especially *Theopolitical Imagination*; "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20.2 (April 2004): 243-74; and "The Liturgies of Church and State," *Liturgy* 20.1 (2003): 25-30.

¹¹⁹ "It is crucial to understand that while the military makes much of team cohesion, and plays heavily on the human desire to belong, its ultimate purpose is the calculated killing of other human beings. Buried under the lofty goals of self-sacrifice and denial for the good of the whole, the noble end of training is nothing other than death" (Hallock, *Hell, Healing, and Resistance: Veterans Speak*, 39).

¹²⁰ McCarthy and Carmody, "Killing Abstractions," 14-15.

¹²¹ Allison and Solnit, *Army of None*.

¹²² I am indebted to Michael Budde of DePaul University for this suggestion.

¹²³ See <http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org>.

¹²⁴ I am indebted to Iraq War veteran Nate Wildermuth for discussions of selective conscientious objection. For his reflections on becoming a conscientious objector, see his "Christ's Centurion," *Sign of Peace: Journal of the Catholic Peace Fellowship* 5.2 (Fall 2006): 6-8, available at <http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/nextpage.asp?m=2499>. For information on the Archdiocese for the Military Services, see <http://www.milarch.org>.

¹²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking*, second ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996/2001), 11-12.

¹²⁶ "Of the many things that veterans with PTSD have to say, perhaps the most important is the call to love one another, to create 'spaces' in which to share each others' pain. We need to listen and to understand; most of all, we need to believe them when they cry, 'No more war, ever again!'" (Hallock, *Hell, Healing, and Resistance: Veterans Speak*, 107).

¹²⁷ See Gerald W. Schlabach, ed., *Just Policing, not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007) and A. James Reimer, "Christians, Policing, and the Civil Order," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 493-500.

¹²⁸ "The Gospel or a Glock?: Mennonites and the Police," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 25.2 (Spring 2007): 23-49; "Community, Policing and Violence," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 26.2 (Spring 2008): 102-16. The latter issue featured responses to Alexis-Baker's initial controversial essay.

¹²⁹ "Trial Begins for Ex-Chicago Police Lt. Accused of Torturing More Than 100 African American Men," *Democracy Now!: The War and Peace Report*, 24 May 2010, available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/5/24/trial_begins_for_ex_chicago_police.

¹³⁰ Budde, “Selling America, Restricting the Church,” 81.

¹³¹ I thank Jim Reimer, Nate Wildermuth, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

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John Howard Yoder: Naysayer or Alternative Yes Man? A Response to James Brenneman's "New School of Thought"

Andrew Suderman

On January 15, 2010, James Brenneman, President of Goshen College,¹ delivered a sermon entitled "Getting to Yes and Amen! The New GC 'School of Thought.'" This sermon, along with Goshen College's decision to begin to play an instrumental version of the United States national anthem at sporting events, has proved to be quite controversial. The playing of the national anthem on March 23, 2010 marked the first time it had been played since intercollegiate athletics began at Goshen College in 1957.² To play the anthem – a decision reversed by the College board of governors in June 2011 – sparked considerable debate, particularly as to how Mennonites relate to the state and its symbols.

Controversial decisions and policies are inevitable when changes are sought and made by a leader of an established school that possesses its own ethos, history, and tradition. My interest, therefore, is not in particular policies that are being changed or introduced, such as the decision to play an instrumental version of the national anthem before sporting events as an act of hospitality. These matters are important and should be debated.³ My interest lies rather in the assumptions that lie behind the decisions.

Proclaiming the inauguration of a "new school of thought" inevitably also means proclaiming what one is moving away from, and presumably why. In his sermon Brenneman outlines the reasons for the change. Especially interesting in his articulation of the new school of thought is his portrayal of the old one that existed (exists) in Goshen College, and how this new perspective proposes to change the College's ethos. He connects the old school of thought with the thought of John Howard Yoder, and thereby critiques Yoder in a deliberate attempt to move away from what Brenneman describes as a "nay-saying," "radical dissenting" theology. In this paper I will examine Brenneman's reading and understanding of Yoder, along with his description of the Mennonite/Anabaptist movement and tradition. I will

summarize both his critique of the old school of thought and his proposed new school of thought, and then respond to his argument.

It is important to recognize that Brenneman's proposed shift comes in a sermon, a medium that typically cannot provide the necessary rationale, argumentation, or nuance for making such a major move. Responding to such a medium thus poses a challenge.⁴ Nevertheless, there is a consistent logic, argumentation, and rationale throughout the sermon as to what Brenneman wants to move away from and move towards, and why. It has a concrete argument and logic that makes it possible for us to engage the sermon and respond to it. *(Page numbers in parentheses below are for one printed-out version of the posted sermon.)*

Brenneman's "New School of Thought"

The "new school of thought" must be understood via the "old school of thought." Brenneman presents a hopeful, positive, and stimulating vision. He does not want the "no's" of life, which are often more abundant than the "yeses," to be the driving force of our lives and relationships. Although he admits that saying "no" is not necessarily a bad thing, he suggests that a distinct school of thought and culture has taken hold of Goshen College, "a culture of dissent."⁵ He states that "sometimes the no's of life keep us from making big mistakes. Sometimes they set limits on less than good behavior and help us deal with life's disappointments. Life's no's teach us how to argue a point, or prioritize what's important. A 'no' can even lead us to the next great opportunity." His concern, however, is that the College has had no difficulty in "just saying no." Brenneman argues that this culture or ethos embodied in Goshen is arrived at honestly. The emergence of the Anabaptist movement, he suggests, arose because its members just said "no."

They [Anabaptists] just said no to the fundamental religious and civil order of the time. They just said no to the church and state union that had been dominating the world for some thousand years. They championed human freedom and separation of church and state and were persecuted and executed for those beliefs, which have since been enshrined in all Western democracies. No wonder they have been described by historians

and others as “radical dissenters,” “sectarian naysayers,” and “prophetic nonconformists.” (1)

The Anabaptist movement, and thus Mennonites who have their roots in it, were “idealists” and “perfectionists” who viewed compromise as sinful, continues Brenneman. This idealistic perfectionist stance was, however, not tested or developed in the social and political life of the time, and therefore compromise was not developed as a positive norm (1). This, he argues, is the result of choosing to be prophetic dissenters, a stance that emerges from the biblical prophets who were primarily naysayers.

Brenneman contends that the culture of dissent emerging from the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement has become entrenched as radical dissent, nonconforming idealism, and prophetic disestablishmentarianism in Goshen College through the work of Dean H.S. Bender and John Howard Yoder. Brenneman sees this culture pitted against the insights of J. Lawrence Burkholder, who “called for all Christians, Mennonites and others, including all those of other faiths trained at Mennonite colleges, to become engaged in the civil, business, political and institutional establishments of the world” (2). Brenneman argues that the school of thought articulated by Bender and Yoder “cared much less about political effectiveness, even arguing . . . for a certain ‘social irresponsibility’ by Christians separated from the world in order to be witnesses to the world” (2). Instead of looking at ways Christians can participate in the different establishments of the world, Goshen College has been entrenched in a culture of dissent that simply says “no” to positive engagement.

Rather than focusing on the Christians’ “no’s” that help maintain a faithful witness to the world, Brenneman advocates for positive engagement and social responsibility (as opposed to Yoder’s “social irresponsibility”) as a worthy vocation for Christian participation.

[Burkholder] did not see such engagement [with civil, business, political, and institutional establishments of the world] as a negative compromise per se. Nor did he see such engagement as a concession to the demands of the nations. . . . Dr. Burkholder saw engagement in and with the world ‘as a way . . . of serving Christ by loving the neighbor with greater effectiveness’ by

helping to change the intellectual and political systems from within the civic and cultural institutions (2).

Through this positive engagement, the “new school of thought” can be of value by inviting Christians to be responsible, constructive agents in the professions available to them (2). Brenneman hopes this engagement will be a balance between the dissenting voice against injustice and the affirming voice for participating in and creating just systems. He seeks to balance the dissenting prophetic stance with that of the Wisdom tradition. He states, “We need some Naysayers. . . . Goshen College has been particularly good at nurturing dissenters, prophets, and nonconformists . . . and we’ve been good at saying who we are not. . . . But, I believe, at this time in Goshen’s history, we need a lot more radical ‘Yea-sayers.’ We need to create a culture of assent alongside our historic culture of dissent. . . . We need to say who we are in positive, contagious ways” (3).

We need you to become the diplomats helping to negotiate peace at the highest levels for national and international communities. We need you to become policy wonks and administrators, business gurus, heads of national and international governmental and non-governmental agencies, institutional and political leaders, salt, leaven and light to advance to [the] kingdom of Christ, ‘God’s Great Yes!’ in the world and in the church. (3)

Responding to Brenneman’s “New School of Thought”

It is easy to get excited about the vision Brenneman articulates, as his “new school of thought” is one that invites Christians to be involved in society and be responsible members of it. His depiction of the “old school of thought,” including the tradition from which it emerged, is, however, problematic.

Yoder’s iconic status in Mennonite theology has led to the unfortunate reality that any criticism of him and his work can be, and unfortunately sometimes is, considered as an assault on what it means to be Mennonite or as “non-Mennonite.” The result is that Yoder is read uncritically. Brenneman reads Yoder critically, and for this he is to be commended.

Brenneman suggests that Goshen College’s “culture of dissent” is a result of (a) Yoder’s emphasis on “social irresponsibility,” which Brenneman

interprets as disengagement from the world, and (b) the continuation of the radical dissenting role that Christians and the church are encouraged to play in the world, a role emerging naturally from the Anabaptist movement and continued in Yoder's work. However, this characterization seems to misunderstand Yoder, and the conclusions misrepresent and misinterpret both Yoder and the historic witness of the Anabaptist movement. I will focus on three important aspects of this characterization: (a) the caricature of Yoder as interested in withdrawing from the world, thus being "socially irresponsible"; (b) the charge that Yoder was simply a prophetic dissenter; and (c) the claim that Goshen College, as a result of Yoder and Bender, has come by its roles as "radical dissenter," "sectarian naysayer," and "prophetic nonconformer" honestly due to its inheritance of the Anabaptist history and story.

Social Irresponsibility

For Brenneman, Yoder's use of the phrase "social irresponsibility" demonstrates an advocacy for disengagement from the world so that Christians can pursue faithful living and faithfulness as the primary goal rather than effectively witnessing to the world (2). However, Brenneman fails to pay attention to the larger context and debate in which Yoder uses this phrase.⁶ Unlike many theologians who seek to provide a coherent systematized theology, Yoder wrote contextually, responding to issues, discussions, and broader themes arising in his time. To understand him, we must understand the context to which he was speaking. This is of course true of all theologians; however, the difference is that many theologians seek to develop and present a mode of theological/philosophical enquiry that leads to timeless theological/philosophical truths which are not dependent on context. Yoder, by contrast, did not succumb to this temptation. He did not try to provide a theology or a theological method that sought to establish a particular timelessness. As a result, he engaged in theological issues being debated at the time. Yoder himself "was wary of categorizing labels for his own work, and he avoided commitments to specific methods," says Mark Thiessen Nation. "This wariness was one of the reasons he gave for not writing 'the big book,' that is to say a book that definitively gave his views on Christian ethics."⁷

Yoder is at times misunderstood “because he challenges the very terms of the debate that many of us who read him continue to employ.”⁸ In this particular instance, Yoder used the phrase “social irresponsibility” in a 1954 paper for a debate exploring the relationship between Christians and the state.⁹ In this debate, he noticed that the term “responsibility” was often used as an emotional appeal towards a virtue that did not require a precise definition. It was simply assumed that one did not want to be “irresponsible.” Yoder notes that the term “responsibility” was generally taken to “[signify] a commitment to consider the survival, the interests, or the power of one’s own nation, state, or class as taking priority over the survival, interests, or power of other persons or groups, of all of humanity, of the ‘enemy,’ or of the church.”¹⁰ That is, the common understanding of “responsibility” prioritized the state over the church, and oneself and one’s group over others, including the enemy.¹¹ To be “responsible” was to respond to an either/or dualism that clothes egotism in the dress of altruism.¹² “And yet it is uniformly one’s own social order, never the opposing one [that is prioritized]; one’s own family, not that of the brother across the border, which is served so heroically.”¹³

Typical of Yoder, rather than picking the best option posited by a false (or forced) dichotomy, he seeks an alternative way. He identifies certain priorities in his search, the most critical being the centrality of the church. He affirms the centrality of the church and its core message of calling everyone to turn to God, and for those who respond to this call to live in love as the basis for both knowledge and decisions.¹⁴ “The state, or more generally the organization of society, exists according to the message of the New Testament for the sake of the work of the church and not vice versa.”¹⁵ If the church is central to both knowledge and decision making, and if the church is central even in its relationship to the state, “responsibility” will, for Christians, look different as they serve the church as their primary focus. “Christian responsibility” may look different and be understood differently than “responsibility” does for those who are not part of the church. Responsibility for the Christian will lead to a different way of being and form of life – a strange way of being – within the world, as different priorities drive the “responsible Christian.” Christian responsibility, therefore, has as its mandate and priority the seeking of the welfare of the Kingdom of God rather than the welfare of the state.

We see then that Yoder, contra Brenneman, encourages active involvement in the world.¹⁶ But for Christians who believe the world has been conquered through the lamb and whose knowledge, creativity, and ontological being is shaped through that reality, involvement in the world will look different. Yoder says this belief

... [frees] us from feeling that we must always choose between faithful but irrelevant dualism and relevant but unfaithful compromise ... by disassociating *involvement* from *moralism*. The incarnation is by definition *involvement*; Christ himself was in the middle of the socio-political maelstrom of military occupation and underground war, 'yet without sin.' To equate *involvement* with *compromise* and the *compromise* with *sin* so that sin is an *essential* dimension of the human situation is not only Christologically unorthodox and the death of fruitful thought; it sells out in advance to the same kind of legalism it intended to combat, for it defines *sin* as the breaking of absolute rules.¹⁷

Yoder argues that assuming that involvement requires compromise, and that compromise means sin, gives in to the same kind of legalism that strives for a more "realistic" and "relevant" involvement within the world. This legalism is similar to that which dismisses Jesus' ethic as unrealistic.

Whether or not one agrees with Yoder's understanding of the primacy of the Lordship of Jesus and the primacy of the church's role in defining what "responsibility" means for Christians as the foundation for their knowledge and decision making, one cannot argue that Yoder encourages disengagement from the world. Rather, he presents a different view of how to be engaged in the world – an alternative view of responsibility. This moves away from the typically vague, emotionally charged view of responsibility that is based on a false (or forced) dualism (e.g., fight or flight, be active or do nothing, kill or be killed, and so forth) to one that brings forward unique, exciting, and creative ways of participating in the world.¹⁸

Brenneman's claim that Yoder encouraged a certain "social irresponsibility," in that he urged some form of disengagement from the world and non-involvement in seeking solutions for the world's problems, is simply incorrect. For Yoder, engagement with the world happens in strange

and different ways: the world would be transformed through the church, not through the state; the world has been saved through the lamb, not the lion; the Kingdom of God is demonstrated through servanthood, not dominance; through peace, not violence; through the cross, not a sword. It is a peculiar way to be involved, to be sure. But it is incorrect to claim that Yoder believed Christians would not or should not be engaged in the world.

“Prophetic dissenter” and “naysayer”

In addition to describing Yoder as an advocate of disengagement from the world, Brenneman characterizes him as a “naysayer” and “radical dissenter,” which, one is led to believe, follows from the prophetic tradition. Brenneman expresses his desire that Goshen College move away from its “culture of dissent” and embrace a “culture of assent.” He portrays this new culture of assent as producing radical yea-sayers rather than radical naysayers who are apparently inheritors of Yoder, the “greatest advocate and facilitator of this ‘radical dissent’” (2). Brenneman wants to move beyond naysaying or “prophetic dissenting” to proclaiming a radical “Yes, we can,” and thus participating in the world in creating just systems. He claims that prophetic dissent arises from a tradition of “selective nonparticipation,” whose key figures or events are the Exodus, the Prophets, and Jesus himself. Yea-saying, in turn, is fruit of the Wisdom tradition (3).

Two questions arise from the effort to pit these two traditions against each other. First, while Brenneman correctly perceives Yoder’s affinity with the prophetic tradition, particularly with the peripheral prophetic tradition,¹⁹ did Yoder really understand the prophetic tradition as dissent?

John C. Nugent provides a helpful perspective on Yoder’s Old Testament narration and its implications for social ethics.²⁰ He suggests that Yoder did not accept the premise of discontinuity between Old and New Testament ethical teaching. Rather, since the NT freely appropriates the OT as its antecedent tradition with no system-induced anxiety about violating dispensational boundaries, Yoder saw continuity between the two testaments where others saw discontinuity.²¹ Nugent indicates that Yoder understood biblical texts in their canonical form and assumed they hung together and presented a coherent message. He assumed scripture was directional, moving from the Old to the New and understanding the OT in light of the NT.²²

Nugent describes this approach as “Canonical-Directional.”²³ Yoder affirms Scripture’s promise/fulfillment structure:²⁴ “Since Jesus is the fulfillment of a salvation historical trajectory that began in the Old Testament, he is the critical interpretive key for discerning between Old Testament developments that constituted genuine progress in the direction God was heading and those that constituted harmful deviations that needed to be overcome.”²⁵ Put another way, events that occurred in the OT have become clearer as to whether they followed and participated in God’s overall plan and intention in light of the NT, in particular Jesus.

Beginning with God’s call of Abraham, the root of the origin of God’s people, Yoder notes the specific call to a particular way of life, a call reiterated throughout the story of Israel. “The change in world history that God envisioned through Abraham is neither a change in rulership over Babylon nor a territorial shift away from Chaldea; it is the creation of a new world of possibilities – ‘the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them.’”²⁶ The people of Israel needed regular reminders of the call to be this distinct community. Israel’s request for a king signals, for Yoder, a rejection by the Israelites of God’s position as king and as the one who will protect them. The decision to rely on kingship rather than YHWH signifies a deviation from God’s ultimate plan of their being a distinct community, a priestly kingdom, “under the sovereign reign that trusts in God alone and bears faithful witness to his peaceful intentions for all creation.”²⁷ This deviation is at the heart of the prophets’ message to their people. Jesus, by choosing not to reestablish a kingship like all other nations, including Israel, pointed to this original intention of God.

Israel could never go back to a strict YHWH war posture; their expectation of an eternal kingship (2 Samuel 7:12-16) would not allow for that. Israel could only move forward with a radically new understanding of kingship. So God transforms it into something useful both to reaffirm his reign and to reconfigure the shape of his people. He does this through the image of a servant who establishes God’s liberating justice on earth in quietness and weakness.²⁸

In Jesus we find a radically different example of kingship. Furthermore, we find a radically different understanding of the kingdom that has arrived, albeit not fully, which this king has come to proclaim. “Because the agenda of the *ekklesia* is the agenda of God’s kingdom, its interests are not narrow but broadly inclusive of all things that impact the welfare of society as well as creation.”²⁹

Brenneman correctly points to Yoder’s affinity with the prophetic tradition as it sought to remind Israel of God’s intention for God’s people to be a distinct community, a priestly kingdom that willingly lives under the sovereignty and rulership of God in full trust while participating in bringing about God’s peaceful intentions for all creation. However, in light of Nugent’s contribution we cannot say that Yoder’s affinity with the prophetic tradition was the affinity of dissent. The prophetic voices reminded Israel about their role in God’s intention to be a distinct community. In following this tradition, Jesus was not pioneering a new way of relating to governing authorities or structures or a new attitude toward monarchical posturing of God’s people in the world.³⁰ “Rather, he announced that what Israel’s prophets began to envision and longed to see was materializing more concretely now that the Kingdom of God was at hand.”³¹

The second question arising from Brenneman’s depiction of the two traditions is whether Jesus is best understood as a prophetic dissenter in the “selective nonparticipation” tradition. While Jesus is described in scripture as Wisdom incarnate, Brenneman puts him into the camp of prophetic dissent. He then advocates moving away from that camp, wanting to pursue and advocate for balance between the prophetic and the wisdom traditions. This moves Jesus away from a central position. Brenneman suggests that a balance is needed between “selective nonparticipation” (Exodus, the Prophets, and Jesus) and “selective participation” (the orders of creation and Wisdom traditions) (3). While he does not likely want to surrender the centrality of Christ for the Christian,³² by creating these two camps and then placing Jesus squarely into the one, it seems that participation in the Wisdom tradition is non-participation in Christ’s mission. This creates the false dichotomy of participating either in Wisdom, where Christ apparently is not, or in the “prophetic dissenting” camp, where Christ’s mission and message are central.

This is problematic, not only because of the implication that the “prophetic dissenter” does not participate in wisdom, but because Jesus himself, the “dissenter,” is portrayed in scripture as Wisdom incarnate. “Jesus is not only the wisdom teacher ‘greater than Solomon’ (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31); he is Wisdom personified.”³³ In 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16 the Apostle Paul rejects the “wisdom of the wise” and the “wisdom of the world,” and holds up the “mystery” and the “foolishness” of Christ and his cross. Not only does Paul rebuke those who believe they are in possession of truth and wisdom,³⁴ he declares, in true OT fashion, that God’s ultimate intentions can be made known only through God’s self-revelation, and that this revelation has been granted to believers in Jesus Christ, God’s personified Wisdom.³⁵

The wisdom tradition can play an important role in providing practical guidance for living the Christian life. However, Brenneman’s logic depicts wisdom as equated with the possession and logic of power and privilege. That is, we turn to “wisdom” in order to learn how to live with power when we no longer have to live on the margins. This is unfortunate, as profound wisdom also arises from the margins.

Brenneman further suggests that “wisdom” is important as a counter-balance to the “prophetic dissenting” tradition. His plea to engage wisdom as a counter-balance is for his audience to get involved in the highest levels of national and international communities, even as heads of governmental and non-governmental agencies (3). Wisdom thus seems to be a way for those who are a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition to integrate faithful lives with power and authority. However, Walter Klaassen reminds us that people “are easily seduced into thinking that getting into the seat of power means disaster will be averted. It is an old fallacy to assume that a basic change takes place in society when Christians take over the reins of power. But as long as the old rules of the use of power continue to operate in our society, even a Christian will not be able to accomplish basic changes.”³⁶

Are voices that reveal and strive for the embodiment of an alternative kingdom, an alternative community, dissenting or not? Are those who proclaim, participate in, demonstrate, and invite others into this alternative kingdom “naysayers”? Or are they affirming and pointing to other options that strive for peace, seek justice, provide hope, and offer salvation?

Yoder was not interested in simply saying “no” to different ways of

being engaged with the world, thereby functioning as purity police with regard to Mennonite theology, identity, and ethics. Rather, he wanted to move past the often-relied-upon dualism that plagues ethical enquiry and theology in general. He was interested in finding an alternative way – a way often overlooked, forgotten, or ignored. A third way provides many exciting, creative, and new forms of being in our world, engaging it in an alternative manner that may look naïve, useless, powerless, foolish, or even a waste of time. Yet, the biblical story points to many examples that demonstrate the radicality of an alternative kingdom. This kingdom is exhibited through “a royal waste of time”³⁷ as Jesus and his disciples sat and ate together; it is demonstrated through the humility of being a servant, not a master, and through the ultimate inefficient means of death, and not just any death but death on a cross. It is this foolish, inefficient, and ineffective death that disarms the principalities and powers (Col. 2:15). Although this third way is often very different and seemingly naïve, it cannot be said that these options are merely ways of saying “no.” Rather, they proclaim a resounding “yes,” albeit not in the usual pattern.

It is not the “no’s” of Bender and Yoder that are important but the “yes” proposals they make. To see Yoder as a naysayer is to misunderstand and misread him. If one were to make a list of the “no’s,” it would only be fair to also identify the “yesses” given by the prophetic voices – and there are many.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite Movement

Brenneman argues that today’s dissenting voices that have led to a “culture of dissent” in Goshen College emerge naturally from its historic Mennonite/Anabaptist roots and those labeled as “radical dissenters,” “sectarian naysayers,” and “prophetic nonconformists” (1). Mennonites and Anabaptists were, he argues, idealists and perfectionists who considered compromise as sinful. “Unfortunately, because so many of them were silenced and killed during those early years, they never really had the opportunity to develop a model for social and political life together that might actually have played out in the world of nations and cultures where compromise can be a positive norm” (1).

Brenneman’s reasoning here is the same as that used to circumvent

taking Jesus' ethical life and teachings seriously as a model for radical ethical and political action, though in this case the comment does not relate to the social life of Jesus but to the social and political life of the Mennonite/Anabaptist movement.³⁸ The assumption often made is that Jesus' ethic was meant to be an "interim" ethic, making Jesus' life and teachings impractical or superfluous for the complicated structures of modern society. "His ethical teachings therefore appropriately pay no attention to society's need for survival and for the patient construction of permanent institutions," Yoder does himself say, adding that "[t]he rejection of violence, of self-defense, and of accumulating wealth for the sake of security, and the footlooseness of the prophet of the kingdom are not permanent and generalizable attitudes toward social values."³⁹ But throughout the rest of *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder demonstrates how the social and political ethic taught and demonstrated by Jesus is one who not only should be taken seriously but requires a new understanding as to how Christians participate in the world.

I do not assume that Mennonites/Anabaptists are the logical continuation of the life that Jesus taught and demonstrated, but I do contend that Brenneman uses the troubling logic noted above and thus cannot adequately account for the radical lives of the early Anabaptists. He assumes that their life after the 16th century was not intentional about its social and political way of being. According to him, the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement and tradition (a tradition approaching 500 years!) has failed to model a social and political life that would be noticed in the world of nations (1). This assessment assumes that (a) the manner in which the Anabaptist tradition carried on even after "so many of them were silenced and killed during those early years" failed to provide a particular and coherent way of being (Brenneman assumes that if those martyred had not been killed, they would have made compromises in order to develop their social and political life), and (b) the Anabaptist tradition did not provide a model or example of social and political life, participation, and being. These assumptions imply an *a priori* view of what it means to participate in the social and political realm, and that because Anabaptists did not participate in this preconceived way, they did not provide a suitable model or example.

However, we can view the story of the Anabaptists from another perspective, not as members of a tradition that failed to provide a model

for social and political life but as a community that sought to provide an alternative way of being socially and politically relevant – and in many ways succeeded in doing so. “They were concerned to follow Jesus and to do that in the religious, social and political sphere.”⁴⁰ They sought to live a life focused on and shaped by Jesus within a community of believers. This was and continues to be a model for social and political life; many people find it appealing and inspirational because it provides an alternative reality. Many are drawn to Anabaptism precisely because of its particular social and political witness. This can be seen in England, South Africa, Chile, Cuba, Indonesia, and other places.

Brenneman’s argument undervalues the life that so many early Anabaptists died for precisely because they were living out their social and political models, and it fails to value the radical lives that demonstrate this alternative today. It is not that the early Anabaptists could not develop a model for social and political life which might have played out in the world of nations because they died; they died because they lived and provided an alternative model of social, ecclesial, and political life. It is in fact a way of life that many around the world find appealing and are interested in learning from.⁴¹ Indeed, it is being noticed in the world of nations.

Conclusion

There are other points in Brenneman’s sermon that could be addressed. One wonders, for example, what the role of the church is in the “new school of thought.” This seems important, since Goshen College will be educating and shaping future leaders of the church.⁴² Brenneman refers to the role of the church only once. In this reference, it is mentioned simply as a benefactor, receiving the gift of a trained and presumably “responsible” person who possesses the College’s “new school of thought.”

It is not easy to provide leadership for a school. Difficult and foundational decisions in terms of the institution’s direction and shape must be made. Creating a vision is exciting, because it determines what the future will look like, what kind of students the school will attract and how they will be shaped, what influence the school will have on the community and society at large, and ultimately how the school will seek to witness to the already present, but not yet fully fulfilled, kingdom of God. A “new school

of thought” creates a new vision. Ironically, while Brenneman intends to create a new school of yea-sayers, he does so by “just saying ‘No!’” to the history and legacy at Goshen College, a legacy that he believes needs to be challenged and changed. He too moves away from something in order to present a new option. Just as surely as he is saying yes to something, he also is saying no to something else. This is not unlike Yoder and the early Anabaptists.

Given all we have analyzed, it seems that Brenneman has not identified a compelling analysis of the causes of Goshen College’s “culture of dissent.” Nor has he portrayed Yoder fairly by identifying him as the College’s greatest advocate and facilitator of this culture. His reading of Yoder is partial at best.⁴³

In being the church, the proclamation, embodiment, and witness of the kingdom of God on earth, the “no’s” are not the central message in its alternative being and witness. The view of the church as a “no” community arises from a long history where the Bible is depicted as a manual of what people should or should not do. This view fails to identify, proclaim, and witness to the “yeses” that distinguish those who believe and live differently. To focus on the “no’s” of the Bible, Jesus, and the church is to miss the point of the wonderful, awe-inspiring, creative, and redeeming work God has done, and is continuing to do, on earth. This is work we are called to notice and invited to participate in as agents of God’s reconciling peace and justice in God’s larger movement – to be an alternative presence and community in a fallen world. “The church is meant to be an alternative community, subverting the values of our dominant society with kingdom of God priorities.”⁴⁴

Yoder’s theology and work was not simply that of “radical dissent” but was rather a radical voice for a way of life that prioritized how the church can be a real, alternative community that acknowledges its distinctiveness when it proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and worships this Lamb that was slain.⁴⁵ Yoder’s message, therefore, does not say “No!” but proclaims a most radical and alternative “Yes!”

Notes

¹ Goshen College, a liberal arts college affiliated with Mennonite Church USA, is located in Goshen, Indiana. See <http://www.goshen.edu/> for more information.

² News release from Goshen College, “President Brenneman releases statement as national anthem is played on campus,” March 23, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-23-10-game-day440.html>. For the sermon, go to <http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/01-20-10-brenneman-chapel394.html>.

³ For example, critics were asking if the hospitality sought through playing the anthem is consistent with the kind of hospitality demonstrated by Jesus as he interacted with culture and the powers during his life. While questions of policy and direction for an educational institution are not my primary interest, I suspect that in wrestling with the theological issues of Christ and culture, tradition and inclusion, dissent and hospitality, some direction for policies may emerge.

⁴ Until the board’s reversal of its decision, Brenneman’s sermon was used, highlighted and referenced as an authoritative source in explaining the decision to play the national anthem. See, for example, “Goshen College Alumni Executive Board releases statement on national anthem decision,” news release by Goshen College, March 11, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-11-10-alumni-anthem431.html>. Brenneman’s sermon is also highlighted as a key resource that provides insights into the “broader context” of the national anthem debate. See “National Anthem Decision Background,” <http://www.goshen.edu/anthem/background/>, accessed May 31, 2011.

⁵ Brenneman refers to Gerald Schlabach’s forthcoming memoir, which describes Goshen College’s distinct school of thought as a “culture of dissent.”

⁶ For interesting notes on Yoder’s use of the phrase “social irresponsibility,” see Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 147-48.

⁷ Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 196. See also Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 97-113, and Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 18-19. Note that Carter runs into the trap of recognizing Yoder’s ad hoc, non-systematized approach and tries to systematize it for Yoder (see Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 107).

⁸ Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 101.

⁹ Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 147-48.

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 36.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 164.

¹⁷ Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 57-58; emphasis in original. Mark Thiessen Nation rightly notes that “Yoder has framed these reflections to counter the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr” in *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*, 164. However, Yoder’s words seem to speak almost directly to Brenneman and the argument he puts forward, demonstrating the overwhelming similarity between Brenneman’s line of reasoning and Reinhold Niebuhr’s.

¹⁸ For example, this view of “responsibility” provided an exciting new avenue for people in South Africa who were struggling against apartheid. Yoder’s theology provided fresh imagination as to how to respond to mandatory military service along with other ways of struggling against apartheid and towards justice for all.

¹⁹ See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), for the distinction between “peripheral” and “central” prophets, where the former denotes those outside of the royal court (e.g., Elijah) and the latter those with access to or from part of the monarchic circle (e.g., Nathan). Though this would require a broader study, it could be argued that Yoder tends to focus on and favor peripheral prophets. I thank W. Derek Suderman for alerting me to Wilson’s work and making this observation regarding Yoder in private communication.

²⁰ John C. Nugent, “The Politics of YHWH: John Howard Yoder’s Old Testament Narration and its Implications for Social Ethics,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39.1 (2010): 71-99.

²¹ Ibid., 75.

²² Ibid., 74.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 79; quoting John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1971), 28.

²⁷ Ibid., 88.

²⁸ Ibid., 85.

²⁹ Robert J. Suderman et al., “Jesus and the Church” in *Jesus Matters: Good News for the 21st Century*, ed. James R. Krabill and David W. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009), 210.

³⁰ Nugent, “The Politics of YHWH,” 88.

³¹ Ibid.

³² A suspicion that has been validated in a recent *Bulletin: The Magazine of Goshen College* (Fall/Winter 2010) that published e-mail correspondence between Jim Brenneman and Shane Claiborne, which demonstrated Brenneman’s desire to maintain Christ-centeredness in who we are as Christians.

³³ Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 195.

³⁴ Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁶ Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973), 81.

³⁷ This phrase is borrowed from Marva J. Dawn's *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

³⁸ See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, 63.

⁴¹ This is not to encourage a positivistic reading of Anabaptist history. Rather it is to recognize the lives that have been shaped by the Anabaptist tradition and the people who have lived according to this radical lifestyle since the birth of Anabaptism.

⁴² Given that Goshen College is affiliated with Mennonite Church USA and supported by its Mennonite constituency, and that the College will be educating, training, and shaping future church leaders of the Mennonite faith, it would be interesting to know what involvement the Mennonite church has on how these leaders are educated and shaped.

⁴³ It might also be said that Brenneman's reading of Yoder is built on the perspective of others such as Rodney Sawatsky, who states: "For one thing, particularly under the tutelage of John Howard Yoder, 'irresponsibility' became a virtue." (Rodney J. Sawatsky, "J. Lawrence Burkholder: Sectarian Realist," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, 2nd ed. [Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1996], 66).

⁴⁴ Robert J. Suderman et al., "Jesus and the Church," 210.

⁴⁵ John Howard Yoder, "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World" in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998), 128-40.

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Nonviolent God: Critical Analysis of a Contemporary Argument¹

Darrin W. Snyder Belousek

1 Introduction

This essay analyzes and assesses a contemporary argument in favor of a nonviolent God.² The subject of God's violence or nonviolence has lately received significant attention by Mennonite theologians, and diverse views have been articulated by various authors.³ For several years, some Mennonite theologians have promoted a certain argument for a nonviolent God that draws a direct inference from what we affirm in faith as true of Jesus to what we ought therefore also affirm in faith as true of God. My aim is to examine this "nonviolent God" argument, addressing its assumptions, implications, and limitations: What assumptions does the argument's logic presuppose? What qualifications do its premises require to be true? What can the argument conclusively prove? What collateral commitments does it presume in order to persuade? In all, my hope is to bring clarity and offer guidance to the ongoing discussion of this important issue within the church.⁴

2 The Argument

The "nonviolent God" argument has been recently restated by J. Denny Weaver:

We believe God is fully revealed in the story of Jesus Christ, in his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Jesus rejected violence. If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then God also refuses to use or sanction violence. If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then God is nonviolent.⁵

Three observations. First, this is a *deductive* argument in the standard form "if ..., then" The logical force of a deductive argument is this: *if* we agree with the argument's premises *and* the argument's logic is correct, *then* we must also agree with the argument's conclusion – that is, we can disagree with the conclusion only on pain of self-contradiction. Weaver thus succinctly restates the argument: "if we truly accept the confession that God

is fully revealed in Jesus, it should be obvious that God is not a God who sanctions violence or who kills.”⁶ Second, this is a *confessional* argument, grounded on the Christian faith concerning God: “We believe....” Any confessional claim prompts two questions: *Who* is this “we”? And on what *basis* does this “we” believe? This “we” is the church; and while addressed to an Anabaptist audience, “we” here extends beyond the peace church to all Christians.⁷ As Weaver emphasizes, the argument is grounded not on a peculiar Anabaptist faith but on the common Christian faith: “that the God of Israel is fully revealed in the story of Jesus is a bedrock tenet of Christian faith.”⁸ Appealing to the one faith of all Christians, the argument thus implicitly invokes the ecumenical authority of the creedal tradition (by which the church has defined and transmitted the “bedrock tenets” of Christian faith).⁹ Third, this is a *biblical* argument, based on the revelation of God in the story of Jesus; it thus assumes also the canonical authority of the scriptural text. The upshot, then, is that fidelity to Scripture and creed requires Christians to confess that God is nonviolent.

Now, Weaver himself is openly suspicious of the creedal formulations of Christian faith. He denies that the ecumenical councils have universal authority for the church, and so denies that the ecumenical creeds are authentic sources for Christian doctrine.¹⁰ His appeal to the creedal tradition is thus a rhetorical tactic to persuade others. Nonetheless, the argument he presents is premised on a confessional claim (“We believe ...”), which is assumed without argument on behalf of the church catholic (all “we” Christians) as if it were a true symbol of the catholic faith (what all Christians believe). Because this confessional claim appeals to the faith of the church, we can address the argument premised on that claim apart from Weaver’s own view of the tradition behind the claim. The argument itself stands or falls on the church’s common confession, independently of Weaver’s individual beliefs.

Insofar as the “nonviolent God” argument seeks to persuade the church on the grounds of its common confessional commitment, then, it is fair to take it on its own terms and to evaluate it on its own merits. We are free to judge the argument according to the Scriptures and creeds of the church, the very authorities on which the argument makes its appeal. My task is thus to test it against scriptural witness and ecumenical creed.¹¹ In testing

it against the creeds, the relevant criterion is the minimum requirement of logical consistency.¹²

3 The Logic of the Argument

The analysis of a deductive argument asks two questions: Is the logic valid – does the conclusion follow logically from the conjunction of the premises? Are the premises themselves true? These are independent questions that must be addressed in turn. I will thus examine first the validity of the logic and then the truth of the premises.

The “nonviolent God” argument can be summed up in a syllogism: God is fully revealed in Jesus; Jesus is nonviolent; therefore, God is nonviolent.¹³ This argument seems logically valid, but is it? The major premise states that Jesus “fully reveals” God and the minor premise states that Jesus is nonviolent, but the logical link is unclear. How does the conclusion follow? How does the notion “fully reveals” connect to what is, or is not, so of Jesus? This notion must be clarified. To say that God is “fully revealed” in Jesus is to say that all that God is Jesus is also; for if Jesus were in any way not what God is, then not all of God would be present in him. With the major premise thus clarified, the argument must be augmented with this premise: if God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus. This is no arbitrary addition that alters the argument. It is logically necessary; without it, the conclusion cannot be derived from the premises.

We can now recast the full argument in valid form, making explicit the logical inferences by which the conclusion is derived:

- (1) God is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true of God is true of Jesus.
- (4) Jesus is not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God is not violent.¹⁴

Such exercises in logic can be tedious, but this analysis has been necessary and useful. Necessary, because were the argument invalid, there would be no point in proceeding. Useful, because we have elucidated a proposition – whatever is true of God is true of Jesus – that was implicit in the argument but, as we will see, requires careful examination.

4 The Theology of the Argument

We turn now to evaluating the truth of the argument's premises. As these premises are theological claims founded on Christian faith, the appropriate measure of truth is "true to Scripture and creed." The task is thus to assess in what sense and to what extent these claims are congruent with Scripture and consistent with creed.

4.1 "God is fully revealed in Jesus"

Premise (1), that God is fully revealed in Jesus, does not appear as such in any of the ecumenical creeds. It is, nonetheless, a reasonable reading of what the creedal tradition intends and implies.¹⁵

The orthodox formula of the Trinity – one essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*) – affirms that the one essence of God exists equally and undivided in each of the three persons of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – such that the Son is "of the same essence (*homoousion*)" with the Father (Nicene Creed). What is true of God's being is equally and fully true of the Father's being, the Son's being, and the Holy Spirit's being, which are one in being. That this was the understanding among the Patristic theologians is confirmed by a statement from Gregory of Nyssa: "All that the Father is we see revealed in the Son; all that is the Son's is the Father's also; for the whole Son dwells in the Father, and he has the whole Father dwelling in himself."¹⁶

The Nicene Creed thus implies that God the Father is fully revealed in God the Son. To show that God is fully revealed in Jesus, we need a logical bridge from "Son" to "Jesus," which is provided by the Definition of Chalcedon. According to Chalcedon, God the Son is incarnate in Jesus such that Jesus is a single, undivided person comprising two essences (substances or natures), the divine essence that the Son shares undivided with the Father and the human essence that Jesus shares with all humanity. Jesus is co-essential (or con-substantial) with both the Father ("according to the Godhead") and humanity ("according to the Manhood"). Thus, the Definition states, Jesus is "perfect in Godhead and perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man."¹⁷ The Definition is careful to state that this union of divine and human natures does not confuse the two natures or diminish either nature but preserves what belongs properly to each. What is divine in Jesus remains divine and fully so, and what is human in him remains human

and fully so; the divinity shared equally and undivided by Father and Son is present fully and perfectly in Jesus. Therefore, as God the Father is fully revealed in God the Son, both of whom are “of the same essence” (Nicaea), so God the Father is fully revealed in Jesus, who is “fully God and fully human” (Chalcedon).

4.2 *“Whatever is true of God is true of Jesus”*

Premise (2), that if God is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God is true of Jesus, is logically necessary for the argument’s validity. On closer examination, however, we see that the latter proposition in this premise, that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus, is theologically incompatible with the creedal tradition.

According to the Nicene Creed, God is of one essence existing in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). According to the Definition of Chalcedon, Jesus is the union of the divine essence (in the person of the Son) and human essence, co-existing within a single divine-human person. Taking these two statements together, we have that God is one essence and three persons (Nicaea) but Jesus is two essences and one person (Chalcedon). Thus, what is true of God is *not* true of Jesus in this case. It is precisely because of this difference between God and Jesus that the creedal tradition does not say simply that Jesus is equal to God: there is more of God than Jesus (God is three persons) and more of Jesus than God (Jesus has two natures). Accordingly, the Athanasian Creed affirms Jesus’ equality with the Father only in respect of his divinity and, to the point here, correspondingly denies Jesus’ equality with the Father in respect of his humanity: Jesus the incarnate Son is “equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood.”

The proposition that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus is thus theologically incompatible with Nicaea and Chalcedon. Further counterexamples to it can be generated from the creedal tradition.¹⁸

First, God has existed from eternity but Jesus has not. God the Son, while “begotten of the Father,” is “begotten not made,” such that the Son is equally uncreated with the Father and so has existed from eternity with the Father – the Son is “begotten of the Father before all ages” (Nicene Creed). But Jesus, as the union of divine essence and human essence, came to be in history. The union of divine essence and human essence cannot have existed

from eternity because, although divine essence is uncreated, human essence is created by God. The Word was with God in the beginning, but the Word through whom the world was made was made flesh in history (John 1:1, 10, 14).

The Definition of Chalcedon makes this very distinction between the Son's existence as God from eternity and Jesus' coming to be as human in history: the Son was "begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the Manhood." While the Son co-existed with the Father "before all ages," the union of Godhead and Manhood in Jesus did not exist "before all ages" but came to be "in these latter days." The Athanasian Creed follows suit: "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world." By affirming that Jesus' humanity derived from that of his mother, the Athanasian Creed implies that Jesus the divine-human person did not exist as such prior to the creation any more than did Mary.

Second, and similarly, God created the world but Jesus did not. From the Trinitarian perspective, we say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were co-present and cooperative in the creation of the world.¹⁹ Scripture witnesses that God created the world through the eternal Son (John 1:10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). But Jesus, the incarnate Son, who is the union of uncreated (divine) essence and created (human) essence, could not have existed prior to the creation, through which human essence came into existence, and thus could not have been co-present or cooperative in the creation.

Again, third, God exists absolutely, independently of any reality other than God; and all other realities ("all things visible and invisible") exist only by having been created by God (Nicene Creed). That is, God *is* even if nothing else exists. Although the Son is "very God from very God" (Nicene Creed), Jesus does not exist in the same way. Insofar as Jesus is the union of uncreated (divine) essence and created (human) essence, his existence is dependent upon created reality. That is, Jesus the divine-human person exists only if the creation exists: no creation, no human essence, no Jesus.

According to the creeds, then, we cannot say simply that whatever is true of God is true of Jesus. In effect, this proposition collapses the "immanent Trinity" (God as an essential unity of distinct persons) into the

“economic Trinity” (God in manifold relation to the creation). As James Reimer has observed, “There is a historicity to the economic Trinity that is not there in the immanent Trinity.”²⁰ Judging by the creedal tradition, therefore, premise (2) is false.²¹ If the argument is to be defended on the grounds of the church’s common confession, then premise (2) – and, hence, premise (1) – must be qualified.

4.3 *Qualifying the Premises*

To see how we might qualify the premises in a manner appropriate to the original argument, I think it would be helpful to inquire what we might mean by saying that God is nonviolent. There are several possibilities, including:

- (a) God *is* (essentially) nonviolent.
- (b) God can not (has no capacity/potential to) do violence.
- (c) God may not (has no right to) do violence.
- (d) God has promised (covenanted) not to do violence.
- (e) God does not (characteristically) do violence.²²

By considering these as candidates for the conclusion of the argument, we can work backwards to determine possible qualified forms for the premises. We can begin by eliminating the obviously problematic candidates.

It seems that (b), (c), and (d) are non-starters. Proposition (b) says that there is something God can’t do, that God lacks the capacity or potential to do something, and thus that God is not omnipotent, contrary to the Nicene Creed (“We believe in one God ... the Almighty”). Proposition (c) implies that there is a moral law independent of God-self, a law of right/wrong that God has not willed but that binds God’s will, permitting some actions while forbidding other actions.²³ Moreover, (c) runs contrary to the biblical declaration that the right of vengeance belongs to God (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). This right is empty, I would argue, if it does not inherently contain the right to violence. Proposition (d) is simply not compelling, in my view, for there are no pronouncements in Scripture where God promises never to use violence. God does covenant with Noah and all creatures for all generations that he will never again destroy the earth and all living things by flood (Gen. 9:11), but that falls well short of a promise never to use violence. This leaves propositions (a) and (e) as candidates for the conclusion of the argument.

We will thus examine both propositions and their respective corresponding arguments in turn.

4.4 *God is essentially nonviolent*

If the conclusion is to be that God is *essentially* nonviolent on the ground that Father and Son are “of the same essence” (Nicene Creed), then the argument would run:

- (1) God’s essence is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God’s essence is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true essentially of God is true essentially of Jesus;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true essentially of God is true essentially of Jesus.
- (4) Jesus is essentially not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God is essentially not violent.

The qualified premises (1) and (2) still must be clarified. Keeping both Nicaea and Chalcedon in mind, when we speak of Jesus’ essence being the same as God’s essence, we are referring specifically and only to Jesus’ divine essence: whatever belongs essentially to God belongs equally and essentially to each Person of the Trinity – thus to the essence of God the Son and thus to the divine essence of Jesus. So, this proposition does follow logically from the creedal tradition: whatever is true essentially of God is true of Jesus’ divine essence.

What, though, is meant by “essence”? The essence (*ousia*) of a thing (as used in the creedal tradition) signifies what is true of that thing in virtue of its being a thing of a certain kind – the general qualities or properties that define something to be the kind of thing it is. These essential properties are necessary properties: if a thing lacks a property essential to being a thing of a certain kind, then it is not a thing of that kind. Now, God is not a being of a certain kind but rather is *sui generis* – “We believe in *one* God . . .” (Nicene Creed, emphasis added).²⁴ Thus, God’s essence signifies what is true of God simply in virtue of being God; God’s essence defines God as God, what it is to be the one being who is God.

It is in reference to the divine essence that the Athanasian Creed makes a series of statements affirming the equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that each *is* God:

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. . . . So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.

These statements elaborate the essence of God, what belongs to God as such: God *is* uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty; any being who is otherwise (created, comprehensible, temporal, etc.) is *not* God. And because the divine essence exists undivided in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each Person is essentially the same, such that these attributes belong equally to each Person – and thus to the Son and thus to Jesus’ divine essence (per Chalcedon). To say that God is *essentially* nonviolent, then, is to say that nonviolence belongs to God in the same way that being uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty belong to God: nonviolence is essential to God’s being, a necessary element of what defines God to be God, so that any being who is violent is not God.

In order for the argument to work in this form – Jesus is essentially nonviolent, therefore nonviolence belongs to God’s essential being – one or more of the essential divine attributes that Jesus shares with God in virtue of being the incarnate Son must necessarily be incompatible with violence. However, none of the essential divine attributes named in the Athanasian Creed – being uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal, and almighty – is, *prima facie*, necessarily incompatible with violence. A being can be any or all these things and be either violent or nonviolent.²⁵ So, we must identify some other essential attribute of God revealed in Jesus that is necessarily incompatible with violence.

I propose to consider two such attributes, both of which are witnessed in the Old and New Testaments, are closely associated with God’s very being, and are directly connected to divine actions and ethical imperatives: holiness and love.

First, holiness. The Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26) is anchored in a divine declaration: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev.

19:2). This divine calling to a holy life is repeated by the Apostle Peter to those chosen by God in Christ and sanctified by the Spirit: “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16, citing Lev. 11:44-45). Holiness is thus an essential attribute of God that grounds the ethical mandate of God’s people: we *ought* to be holy as God-self *is* holy.

So, is holiness, as revealed by Scripture, incompatible with violence? One might well argue that the ethical imperative of holiness in all conduct does entail renouncing violence: Christian warfare after the pattern of Christ is spiritual warfare, characterized by purity of heart and holiness of spirit; it relies solely on the power of God, pursues only the way of righteousness and peace, and thus rejects the weapons of the flesh and the violence done with them (cf. 2 Cor. 6:6-7, 10:3-4; Eph. 6:10-18). As the holy life of the Christian is to be imitative of the holiness of God revealed in Jesus, one might then infer that God’s holiness is itself incompatible with violence.

The full witness of Scripture is more complicated, however. Indeed, God’s holiness is portrayed in the OT as dangerous -- and deadly. Inappropriate, even inadvertent, contact with the holy, as well as the presumptuous profaning of the holy, kills. When Aaron’s sons offer “unholy fire” on the altar “before the LORD,” they are promptly consumed by fire that comes “from the presence of the LORD” (Lev. 10:1-3). While the previously captured and recently recovered ark of the covenant, divinely designated for the “holy of holies,” was being returned to Jerusalem, the cart transporting it was shaken by the oxen pulling it; one of the attendants steadied the ark with his hand, such that “the anger of the LORD was kindled” and he was immediately struck dead by God (2 Sam. 6:6-7). Unless we discount these stories, we cannot conclude that God’s holiness is incompatible with violence.

Second, love. When God reveals his very being on the holy mountain, he proclaims the holy name in terms that identify God with love: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exod. 34:6). This refrain, repeated throughout the Psalms and Prophets, tells us who and what God really is. Echoing this divine declaration, John identifies God with love and love with God: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for

God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). As with holiness, love is an essential attribute of God that grounds the ethical mandate of God’s people: we *ought* to love because God *is* love.

Is love, then, as witnessed by Scripture, incompatible with violence? God’s love is revealed in God’s voluntarily offering his own life through the Son for the sake of salvation: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). Far from destroying life, God’s love saves life, even that of sinners, even at the cost of God’s own life sacrificed through the Son. It is precisely the sacrifice of one’s own life for the other’s sake, rather than violating the life of the other, that characterizes God’s love demonstrated in Christ and that Christians are mandated to imitate: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). So, the divine love revealed in Jesus’ self-sacrifice seems irreconcilable with violence.

But, again, things are more subtle than they appear. On the one hand, it seems inconceivable that a God of self-sacrificial love could be violent. On the other, it seems equally inconceivable that a self-sacrificing God “abounding in steadfast love” could allow innocent suffering. Yet the world witnesses the incalculable suffering of innocent life; and the Bible testifies to the plight of the righteous who suffer. Unless we either deny the evidence of suffering or assert the nonexistence of innocence (by, say, Augustine’s doctrine of “original sin” or Calvin’s doctrine of “total depravity”), we must affirm that innocent suffering is compatible with a loving God. Moreover, unless we deny God’s sovereignty over, and freedom, in all things, we must affirm that innocent suffering exists by God’s choice (even if not by God’s intention or action). If God’s love can let innocents suffer, then there is apparently something that a loving God is *not* willing to sacrifice in order to prevent or end such suffering.²⁶

The problem of suffering, then, complicates an inference from divine love to divine nonviolence. At least, God’s love is compatible with not only the actual existence of innocent suffering but also the divine choice to allow it. This divine choice, one might argue, implies a “passive violence” on God’s part – the violence of the onlooker or bystander who might intervene

to prevent or end suffering but deliberately delays in doing so.²⁷ And if God's love does not necessarily save the innocent from suffering, then it need not save the wicked from death and could even destroy the wicked to avenge the innocent (a theme repeated throughout the Psalms). It thus might be that, as Reimer put it, "God is love but not a pacifist."

Now, the "nonviolent God" apologist might want to dispute the traditional view of divine power – that God is "almighty" and all things happen only by either God's action or God's permission. Thus, Denny Weaver redefines God's power as "the ability to restore life where there is currently no life, and the ability to carry out the divine will in spite of human violence and disobedience."²⁸ In this view, God can reverse but not prevent evil, and God's power cannot do all that God's love would want.²⁹

4.5 God is characteristically nonviolent

If the conclusion is to be that God is *characteristically* nonviolent, then the argument would be: what is characteristic of God is also characteristic of Jesus; Jesus is characteristically nonviolent; therefore, God is characteristically nonviolent. In full form:

- (1) God's character is fully revealed in Jesus;
- (2) If God's character is fully revealed in Jesus, then whatever is true of God's character is true of Jesus' character;
- (3) Therefore, whatever is true of God's character is true of Jesus' character.
- (4) Jesus' character is not violent;
- (5) Therefore, God's character is not violent.

Like the previous form of the argument, this version requires some clarification. First, we must distinguish character from essence. Although a being's essence (*ousia*) determines what is normative for a being of that kind, a being having freedom of choice can develop a character contrary to its essence; that is, essence is normative for, but not necessarily determinative of, character. So, while rationality is essential to being human – the human being is "the rational animal" (per Aristotle) – humans are capable of choosing irrationally. And, through the habit of making choices and taking actions contrary to reason, they can develop a character unbecoming their rational nature. Now, God, being perfect (in contrast with humans), cannot act in ways incongruent with his essence. But, as we have seen, God's

essence neither requires nor precludes that God act with violence; thus, concerning violence, God's character is not determined by his essence. If God is nonviolent, therefore, it is not by necessity but by *choice*.

Second, we must distinguish God's character from God's sovereignty. God holds the exclusive right of vengeance (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19); and this right is empty if it does not contain an inherent right to violence. Still, that God holds this right tells us only about God's status – God is Sovereign Lord -- and nothing about God's character. God's character is revealed by how God in sovereign freedom chooses to exercise that right of vengeance, whether punitively or mercifully, retributively or redemptively, violently or nonviolently. To know God's character we must look to God's actions.³⁰

Premise (1) of this version of the argument is that God's character is fully revealed in Jesus. Because character is distinct from and underdetermined by essence, from the fact that the Father and the Son are "of the same essence" (Nicaea) it does not follow that Father and Son are of the same character. Thus, while compatible with the creed, premise (1) must find direct support elsewhere. Can this claim be grounded in Scripture? I think that one can make a plausible case.

Hebrews 1:3 states that the Son is "the exact imprint of God's very being" (NRSV) or "the representation of [God's] essence" (NET). The Greek text here does not speak of God's being or essence (*ousia*) as in the creeds; rather, it says the Son is "the representation (*charaktēr*) of [God's] being (*hypostasis*).³¹ The Greek word *hypostasis* is the same term later used by the Cappadocian fathers to make the key distinction of Trinitarian orthodoxy, that God is one essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*). If we were to interpret this text in continuity with the development of doctrine, then we could say: Jesus, because he incarnates the Son, is the exact representation (or full reproduction) of divine personhood – and thus the revelation of God's personal character. Moreover, Jesus declares that the Son says and does only what is according to the Father's will, so that Jesus' words and works testify to the Father;³¹ we may thus infer that Jesus' choices are consistent with the Father's will and revelatory of the Father's character.

We now consider the minor premise of the argument. Is Jesus, according to Scripture, characteristically nonviolent? Let us review the evidence and infer his character from his choices and actions.³² The (canonical) Gospels tell us that Jesus forgives sins, heals diseases, and raises the dead;

he teaches his followers to renounce retaliation, love enemies, and accept suffering; he chooses not to resist arrest or retaliate against his enemies; he chooses to submit to unjust death on the cross; and post-resurrection he reconciles to himself the disciples who deserted, denied, and doubted him. The Gospel tradition of Jesus' practice of non-resistance and non-retaliation, especially in suffering and death, is paralleled in the Petrine tradition (1 Pet. 2:21-23). By consciously and consistently choosing non-resistance and non-retaliation, Jesus effectively renounced violence, which is evidence of a nonviolent character.

From the Gospel evidence, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that it was God's will to renounce violence in Jesus' life and teaching, death, and resurrection. This idea, that God wills not to use violent means to accomplish redemption in Christ, is attested in the writings of the early church. In the *Epistle to Diognetus*, we read: ". . . violence does not belong to God" (7:4). The context there concerns the incarnation, how God worked through Christ to save humanity by persuasion rather than by compulsion. This same idea is elaborated by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*:

. . . the Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means . . . but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction. (5.1.1)³³

God *voluntarily* renounces violence in redemption through the incarnation, for two reasons: to redeem creation from violent dominion by divine violence would only add to the injustice of the captivity of creation to sin; and redemption by force would be destructive of the creation God intends to redeem. God thus rejects violent means to accomplish redemption.

Does all this entail that Jesus, and so God, is characteristically nonviolent? No, for two reasons. First, the most we can infer from the narrative is that nonviolence is consistent with Jesus *as far as we know* – that is, as far as the Gospels go. Even the Bible believer who confesses Jesus as Lord faces a problem of induction here; the textual evidence underdetermines confessional commitment: Jesus has been nonviolent thus

far, but it does not necessarily follow that he must always be so. To be conclusive, the argument must assume also that the divine character of Jesus is revealed exhaustively by the Gospel story. This assumption requires an independent argument.

Second, and more important, from the fact that God-in-Christ willed to renounce violence for the sake of redemption, it does *not* follow that God has renounced violence *in all things*. It thus appears that the “nonviolent God” argument is premised on a false dichotomy: Jesus/God rejects violence either absolutely or not at all. The argument assumes that, because Jesus foregoes violence for himself and forbids violence to humans, God has simply rejected violence. It fails to consider that Jesus might forego violence for himself and forbid violence to humans while God nonetheless retains the prerogative as God. In Trinitarian terms, one could say that the Son, by his self-emptying for our sake, relinquishes the prerogative of God, which the Father retains in heaven and which the Son reclaims at his ascension (Phil. 2:6-11). Preserving the distinction between divine right and human right and recognizing the *kenosis* of the incarnation, one could thus maintain that the Gospel story of Jesus, while revelatory of God and normative for human ethics, is neither exhaustive of God nor restrictive of the divine prerogative.³⁴ Insofar as God retains sovereign prerogative, therefore, the divine character revealed in Jesus may be compatible with both violence and nonviolence concerning different matters at different times. This leaves open the possibility of *both* a nonviolent redemption *and* a violent judgment (which, in fact, was the view of Irenaeus³⁵).

Not only does the Gospel story of Jesus not necessarily entail a nonviolent God, there is more of Jesus to consider. Jesus himself says that the Father has entrusted to him as Son all authority to judge (John 5:16-30). And the Apostles testify that Jesus is God’s appointed “judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42; cf. 2 Tim. 4:1). This faith affirmation grounds the eschatological expectation of the creedal tradition: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed).

The NT includes various texts of Jesus the divine judge. Jesus himself warns explicitly of coming judgment in two parables: at the end of the age, he will direct his angels to gather “all causes of sin and all evildoers,” who are to be consigned to fiery destruction (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43); and when the kingdom comes he will judge “all the nations” and dispatch those

who neglect the poor and needy to “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:31-46). Paul affirms that Jesus is coming with fiery vengeance to dispense “the punishment of eternal destruction” to “those who do not obey the gospel” (2 Thes. 1:5-10). The evangelists and apostles frequently cite Psalms 2 and 110 in reference to Jesus as God’s messiah;³⁶ both affirm the right of God’s anointed ruler to judge and expect he will do so with violence (cf. Psalms 2:1-2, 7-9; 110:1, 5-6). And in John’s vision, Jesus “judges and makes war with justice” to defeat the beast and the armies of the nations, who are “killed with the sword of his mouth” (Rev. 19:11-21). Jesus the divine judge is thus attested in multiple texts, several premised explicitly on either the potential for, or the promise of, violence. Not only can we not conclude with certainty that Jesus is characteristically nonviolent, we must allow for the possibility of his doing violence in the service of divine judgment.

Is that the end of the argument? Not quite. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). The Jesus who comes to judge will be the same Jesus who has already come to give his life for us and ever lives to make intercession for us. One can thus plausibly argue that we may expect a final judgment congruent with Jesus’ ministry. At the very least, God’s final judgment to be executed by Jesus need not be violent any more than God’s work of redemption through the incarnation was violent. Nonetheless, this does not rule out a violent final judgment.

5 The Hermeneutics of the Argument

Two hermeneutical issues have emerged in our analysis. How should we interpret the OT revelation of God? How should we interpret the NT witness to Jesus?

When considering whether God is nonviolent, I cited certain stories from the OT portraying God as acting violently. The “nonviolent God” apologist would want to dispute these texts: Do they actually reveal the true God? These stories portray God as both peaceable and violent, one might say; but we cannot make a simple inference from the textual evidence to the divine nature. Instead, we must view the OT through the prism of Jesus, which refracts the text into a spectrum, revealing both the true nature of God and false projections about God. For his part, Denny Weaver

distinguishes between the “textual God” and the “actual God”: the textual God is variable and sometimes violent, but the actual God is consistent and strictly nonviolent. To know the actual God in the biblical text, we need an extra-textual criterion of truth – Jesus. Because Jesus reveals God and Jesus is nonviolent, we know that the true God is revealed by the peaceable stories.³⁷

Such a hermeneutical maneuver – drawing a distinction between the God of the OT and the God revealed in Jesus – is not surprising, but it is problematic. First, it exhibits the tendency toward Marcionism that Reimer diagnosed as a perennial problem in the Anabaptist tradition.³⁸ Second, it begs the question. Jesus is *not* an extra-textual criterion, for we know him from the Gospel stories. Thus we could, as historical-critical scholars do, apply this distinction to Jesus himself: How do we know that the “textual Jesus” is the “actual Jesus”? The “nonviolent God” view assumes a simple identity between the Gospel Jesus and the real Jesus, effectively an affirmation of faith in the truth of the text. So, if we can know by faith the actual Jesus from the textual Jesus, why can’t we know by faith the actual God from the textual God? Here, the two problems converge: the distinction between truth and text, insofar as it is applied to God and the OT but not to Jesus and the Gospels, effectively treats the OT and the NT as qualitatively different kinds of revelation. The “nonviolent God” argument, if it is to convince, thus requires a rationale for this difference (other than the fact that the OT includes violent stories of God!).

At least, then, the “nonviolent God” argument presupposes that we read the Bible through the prism of Jesus. This is a standard claim of the Anabaptist tradition – Jesus the incarnate Word is the “interpretive center” of Scripture.³⁹ Insofar as the argument requires a collateral commitment to an Anabaptist hermeneutic, let us agree that Jesus is the “canon of the canon.” But, *which* Jesus? The “nonviolent God” argument requires a strictly nonviolent Jesus. Is *that* Jesus strictly biblical?

When considering whether Jesus is nonviolent, I cited textual traditions in the NT that portray him as executing judgment with vengeance and violence. In light of this evidence, the conclusion of the argument reduces from certainty to probability. The degree of probability depends on the relative weights assigned to the various traditions of textual evidence.

One can conclude with certainty that God is nonviolent because Jesus is nonviolent only if one gives absolute weight to the Gospel traditions of a healing, forgiving, non-resisting, non-retaliating Jesus and zero weight to the multiple traditions of a judging, punishing, destroying, and killing Jesus – an obviously biased weighing of the evidence. If one assigns a non-zero weight to the latter traditions of textual evidence, the upshot is that any argument inferring a nonviolent God from a nonviolent Jesus will be only as convincing as one's interpretation of the scriptural traditions of Jesus the divine judge.

The “nonviolent God” apologist would presumably maintain a metaphorical reading of the biblical texts of divine judgment. For his part, Weaver argues elsewhere that the apocalyptic account of divine warfare (Rev. 19) is a story, not of divine violence against evildoers but of nonviolent victory over evil.⁴⁰ Even so, this leaves multiple independent textual traditions pointing to a violent final judgment to be executed by Jesus himself. If, as the “nonviolent God” view maintains, Jesus/God is strictly nonviolent, then this inter-textual concurrence demands explanation and the individual texts themselves beg for a non-question begging interpretation.⁴¹

This demand points to a serious shortcoming of the “nonviolent God” argument. The argument is premised on the claim that “God is fully revealed in the story of Jesus Christ, in his life, teaching, death and resurrection.” This implies that God's revelation in Jesus ends at the end of the Gospels. According to Scripture and creed, however, God's revelation in Jesus is not confined to the historical past but continues in the living present and extends to the eschatological future. The argument conveniently excludes those future chapters in “the story of Jesus” that are evidently incompatible with the conclusion: the nonviolent God is “fully revealed” by less than the full Jesus.⁴²

6 Conclusion

The “nonviolent God” argument, to be conclusive and convincing, requires more than the stated premises. At least, it presupposes a peace church hermeneutic. In addition, it must make one (or more) auxiliary assumptions:

- no difference between “immanent Trinity” and “economic Trinity”
- God’s power is something less than actual omnipotence
- no distinction between divine right and human right
- OT and NT are distinct kinds of revelation
- the divine revelation in Jesus is limited to the Jesus of history past.

In the end I concur with Reimer: “Some Mennonite theologians have implied that if we take Jesus to be the full revelation of God, and if we understand the gospel of Jesus as essentially the rejection of all violence, then it follows that God is a pacifist. This, in my view, has dire consequences.”⁴³

Notes

¹ Dedicated to the memory of A. James Reimer.

² This essay is a much elaborated, more detailed version of “God, Jesus, and nonviolence: A response to J. Denny Weaver,” published online by *The Mennonite* (July 2010). My thanks to Mary Schertz and Willard Swartley for commenting on the original essay, and to Stephen Dintaman, Gerald Mast, Elmer Thiessen, and three anonymous reviewers for commenting on previous drafts of the present essay. My thanks also to André Gingerich Stoner for personal conversation and to J. Denny Weaver for extensive correspondence, respectively, in response to the original essay.

³ See the collection of papers from a Mennonite symposium in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003).

⁴ My aim is thus to function as an “agent of linguistic self-consciousness” for the faith community. See John Howard Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 15-45.

⁵ J. Denny Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” *The Mennonite* 13 (July 2010) 17-22, 19. The “nonviolent God” view is defended with a similar argument by Ted Grimsrud, “Is God Nonviolent?” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003), 13-17. A. James Reimer critiqued essentially the same argument: see “God is Love but Not a Pacifist” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 486-92.

⁶ Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” 21.

⁷ Weaver initially addresses fellow Mennonites: “We are a peace church” (“The peace church as worship of God,” 17). But in his correspondence with me, he confirmed that he does intend the “we” of the “nonviolent God” argument to include all Christians and thus that the statement “We believe...” is intended to state what all (or most) Christians would recognize as their common confession of faith.

⁸ Weaver, “The peace church as worship of God,” 21.

⁹ Lest the reader think that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the ecumenical-creedal tradition are inherently incompatible, see Howard J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

¹⁰ See J. Denny Weaver, “Christology in Historical Perspective,” in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990). For a critical examination of Weaver’s view and a positive assessment of creedal orthodoxy from an Anabaptist perspective, see A. James Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology,” in *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, ed. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 129-61.

¹¹ We will consider the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon. I use the common shorthand “Nicene Creed” to refer to the creed originating with the Council of Nicaea (325) and finalized by the First Council of Constantinople (381). Concerning the biblical basis, historical development, and practical implications of the Nicene Creed, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

¹² Weaver himself, of course, rejects the ontological categories of the creedal tradition in favor of narrative categories. While one need not express the catholic faith using the conceptual categories of Nicaea and Chalcedon, statements that plainly contradict Nicaea or Chalcedon do not truly represent the catholic faith.

¹³ In this bare-bones version, I have bracketed the argument’s confessional aspect to exhibit its basic logic. We should not forget that the argument’s premises are prefaced by “We believe...”.

¹⁴ Note that (1), (2), and (4) are the premises of the argument, (3) is derived from the conjunction of (1) and (2), and the conclusion (5) is derived from the conjunction of (3) and (4). The logical validity of the argument is verified by observing that (1) - (3) comprise the valid form *modus ponens* (if P then Q; P; therefore Q) while (3) - (5) comprise the valid form *modus tollens* (if P then Q; not-Q; therefore not-P).

¹⁵ In his correspondence with me, Weaver confirmed that he thinks premise (1) is directly supported both by the Nicene formula that the Father and the Son are “of the same substance” (*homouousion*) and by several statements in the Athanasian Creed.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Difference between Essence and Hypostasis*, quoted from Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 31.

¹⁷ I trust the reader will be neither offended nor misled by this traditional masculine language, which I keep here to preserve the intended precision of the original statements.

¹⁸ How are such ontological matters relevant to the ethical matter at hand? The relevance is indirect: the argument seeks to derive the conclusion that God is nonviolent from premise (2); if that premise does not hold true in general, then it cannot be assumed as true in particular. The counterexamples show the premise does not hold true in general (i.e., it is false in some cases). To proceed with the argument on premise (2) as originally stated would require

an independent argument that premise (2), while false as pertains to ontological matters, is nonetheless true as pertains to ethical matters. Otherwise, the argument would beg the question.

¹⁹ So Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in Phillip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Volume III: On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), writes: "...the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly" (I, 4); "...together both the Father and the Son, and the Spirit of both, work all things equally and harmoniously" (XIII, 11).

²⁰ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487.

²¹ Here I use the standard truth table from propositional logic for compound propositions of the form "if P then Q" – if P is true but Q is false, then the compound proposition is false. In premise (2), P = "God is fully revealed in Jesus" is true, but Q = "whatever is true of God is true of Jesus" is false.

²² In his article, Weaver writes of "the character of God" as the intended subject of the argument.

²³ The long philosophical-theological debates over both the extent of God's power and the relation between God and morality cannot be discussed here.

²⁴ The necessary uniqueness of the divine essence – that there can be only one being who is God – has also been the subject of logical demonstration. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 42.

²⁵ Weaver would say this is precisely the point concerning the role he claims the creeds played in enabling the sanctioning of violence in the theology and ethics of the medieval church: the ontological categories of the creeds do not bear any ethical content, and thus the creeds separate Christology from ethics, allowing the accommodation of Christ and empire, cross and sword (J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 92-96). To the contrary, as Reimer has observed ("Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology"), insofar as the ontological claims of the Nicene Creed – the Son is "True God from True God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father" – are explicitly anti-Arian, they are also effectively anti-"Constantinian."

²⁶ The standard answer is that this "something" is free will. The long philosophical-theological debate concerning the "free will" theodicy cannot be discussed here.

²⁷ Regarding God's delay to deliver the oppressed and avenge the righteous, see Exod. 2:23-3:10, Psalm 13, and Rev. 6:9-11.

²⁸ Weaver, "The peace church as worship of God," 22.

²⁹ This was the implication of "nonviolent God" that most troubled Reimer: "It implies that all violence (such as the death of children or even the suicide of a distraught mother) is ultimately meaningless and outside the providence of God. It also suggests that evil will not be punished and judged" ("God is Love but Not a Pacifist," 491).

³⁰ For a survey and assessment of recent scholarly discussion of God's moral character and violence, see Chapter 14 of Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³¹ John 5:19, 30, 36; 6:38; 7:16; 12:45, 49; 14:9-10.

³² Here one might think that the nature of the argument has shifted, from deductive to

inductive. We must not confuse the main argument with a sub-argument for one of the premises. That the minor premise (nonviolent Jesus) of the main argument (nonviolent God) rests on inductive evidence does not alter the deductive form of the main argument, for deductive arguments can employ inductive premises.

³³ Phillip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 884.

³⁴ Cf. Mary Schertz, "Is God Nonviolent?" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21 (Winter 2003), 33-36.

³⁵ So Andrew Klager writes: "Where Irenaeus makes an important contribution is with respect to the Incarnate Christ's nonviolence and its implications for the Father's capacity for violence *at the time of the atonement*" (479, original emphasis). See Andrew Klager, "Retaining and Reclaiming the Divine: Identification and the Recapitulation of Peace in St. Irenaeus of Lyons' Atonement Narrative," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 422-80. As stated in his "rule of faith," Irenaeus expected Jesus to return in judgment to execute divine vengeance by imposing the punishment of "everlasting fire" upon "the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked" (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1).

³⁶ Cf. Matt. 22:41-44; Acts 2:34-36; 4:25-26; 13:33-34; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:20-21; Heb. 1:2-13.

³⁷ Weaver, "The peace church as worship of God," 20-21. Similarly, Grimsrud: "Our conviction that God is nonviolent...simply affirms that we read Scripture...through the lens of Jesus' life and teaching...we have an interpretive key allowing us to see the consistent nonviolence of God..." ("Is God Nonviolent?" 17).

³⁸ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 490-91.

³⁹ Cf. C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 82-86, and *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), Art. 4.

⁴⁰ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 20-33.

⁴¹ I thus concur with Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "Response 3," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.1 (Winter 2003), 45-49, that the "nonviolent God" argument effectively grants nonviolence "hermeneutical priority."

⁴² This deficiency is not peculiar to Weaver's presentation. Grimsrud likewise narrows the "lens" for reading Scripture to "Jesus' life and teaching" ("Is God Nonviolent?" 17). Thus, he claims "the consistent nonviolence of God" based on a selective appeal to Jesus.

⁴³ Reimer, "God is Love but Not a Pacifist," 491.

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Eco-pacifism and the Anabaptist Vision

Matthew Eaton

Introduction

While the early Anabaptist movement was diverse and major differences arose among its adherents, the majority would eventually agree that true faith could never be coerced through the use of the sword. The concept behind eschewing the sword would continue to be refined and would evolve into the pacifist ethic widely held by Anabaptists today. While technical differences may arise in defining what constitutes violence, it is generally held that at least the killing of other human beings goes against the moral code of our tradition. However, especially in light of modern injustices such as racism, sexism, and exploitative economic practices, Anabaptists have also begun to expand the concept of pacifism to promote just relationships in general, not limiting nonviolence to the taking of life.

The expansions thus far have been mostly limited to relationships between humans under the assumption that humans are the highest moral priority on the planet.¹ A number of factors, however, can lead us to reconsider whether this ought to be the case and to what extent we should begin thinking nonviolently about the Earth and its inhabitants. Insights from cosmic and biological evolution have shown that humans arise out of the same creative matrix that brought about the rest of the cosmos.² Cognitive ethology teaches that many other-than-human animals [hereafter, animals] share with us a rich emotional life, can suffer and experience joy just as humans do, and perhaps even have moral systems of their own.³ Ecology and climatology have made us aware of our impact on the environment and the future of life on the planet.⁴ Essentially, our new understanding suggests that humans are in some sense kin to the rest of matter and are not the only beings in the cosmos that can experience joy and pain.⁵ Likewise, it shows that our contemporary practices are often unwittingly violent toward the earth-other-neighbors with whom we share the planet.⁶ These insights, along with the general view that God loves creation and calls it good, suggest that we rethink how we treat the other-than-human, using and expanding the

Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition of nonviolence as a guide to an earth-care ethic.

As important as these insights are, in order to create a distinct Anabaptist eco-pacifist ethic, we must ensure that broader resources in the biblical tradition support the idea that our earth-other-neighbors are worthy of not only dignity but nonviolent treatment. I establish this below, though my ethic clearly moves beyond the biblical witness. Yet, as neither the biblical nor the Anabaptist tradition has a solid model for rejecting our current system of valuation that prioritizes the human over the rest of creation, I begin with a philosophical model that establishes a biospherically egalitarian framework for our use. The eco-feminist philosophy of Karen Warren provides such a framework. After describing Warren's model for the ethical consideration of all matter, I show how one particular strand of the biblical tradition – eschatological redemption in Pauline theology – supports Warren's larger claim that all matter is morally considerable and should be treated with nonviolence and dignity. I then bring these insights to bear on contemporary Anabaptism through a discussion of John Howard Yoder's use of nonviolence to promote an earth-care ethic. I use Yoder to further define what nonviolence toward the Earth might mean for an Anabaptist eco-pacifist theology. The implications of such a theology are complex and difficult to implement, but I argue that the eco-pacifist ethic is nevertheless practical and necessary. I conclude with one particular way to apply eco-pacifism – a contextual-eschatological form of vegetarianism.

Ecofeminism and the Logic of Domination

The term "ecofeminism" was introduced in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne, in her work *Le féminisme ou la mort*.⁷ Since then, ecofeminism as a philosophical discipline has grown tremendously.⁸ Although there are different forms of ecofeminist thought, the movement claims that there are at least conceptual, if not causal, links between domination of women and domination of the natural world. Val Plumwood describes three basic types of ecofeminists: (1) those pointing to classical philosophy and its support for value-hierarchical dualisms; (2) those pointing to the Enlightenment development of mechanical models for nature and science, replacing more holistic, organic models stressing the continuity between humans and

nature; and (3) those pointing to the difference in engendered experience as male and female, which leads to a male rejection of what is feminine and natural.⁹ With Plumwood, I agree that the latter two types of ecofeminism are problematic.

Rosemary Radford Reuther described the first type of ecofeminism in her 1975 book, *New Woman, New Earth*:

Women must see that there can be no solution for them and for the evolutionary crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and underlying values of this society. The concept of domination of nature has been based from the first on social domination between master and servant groups, starting with the basic relationship between men and women. An ecological revolution must overthrow all the social structures of domination. This means transforming that world-view which underlies domination and replacing it with an alternative value system.¹⁰

Reuther suggests that patriarchal domination of women led to the domination of nature by men, since traditionally women have been more strongly identified with nature.¹¹ While this may be true, the specific sequential causes of the rise of dualistic thinking and the domination of women and nature are probably lost in history.¹² Nevertheless, Reuther's idea is helpful. Regardless of the exact nature of the link between women and nature, and the domination of both in patriarchal societies, the conceptual framework remains the same (essentially dualistic), and ending the domination requires a fundamental rethinking of it. To describe this framework in further detail, I now turn to Karen Warren.

Warren's philosophy focuses on common conceptual frameworks used to justify the domination of women, nature, and other groups of marginalized humans (e.g., the poor, ethnic minorities): "A *conceptual framework* is a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one's world.... [It] functions as a socially constructed lens through which one perceives reality."¹³ Conceptual frameworks may

or may not be oppressive.¹⁴ They are oppressive when used to “explain, and ‘justify’ relationships of unjustified domination and subordination.”¹⁵ For Warren, five features make such frameworks oppressive: (1) value-hierarchical, “up-down” thinking;¹⁶ (2) value dualisms asserting one group has more worth than another; (3/4) support and coercive power to keep certain groups in positions of privilege and others in positions of relative weakness; and (5) an underlying “logic of domination” that explains and justifies why certain groups are allowed to dominate other subordinates.¹⁷ Examples of dualisms used within these frameworks are mind vs. matter, human vs. other-than-human, masculine vs. feminine, culture vs. nature, public vs. private. In each pair, greater value is placed on the front side of the dualism, relegating the back side to inferiority and lesser moral worth.

Warren and other ecofeminists seek to repudiate value-hierarchical and value-dualistic ways of thinking, the logic of domination that links the subordination of women, other humans, and nature. Ecofeminist philosophy rejects this logic because neither superiority nor difference among groups is adequate ground for control, subordination, or oppression.¹⁸ Rejecting the logic of domination calls into question the privileged status of any group over another. It challenges gender, race, and class-based hierarchies, as well as the anthropocentric attitude used to justify any and every use of our earth-other neighbors. The conceptual system undergirding them is rejected.¹⁹

The rejection of the logic of domination resembles and extends what deep ecologists call “biospherical egalitarianism,” which Arne Naess describes as a non-anthropocentric value axiom that acknowledges “the equal right [of all] to live and blossom.”²⁰ Biospherical egalitarianism rejects a master-slave relationship between humans and nature, and all are ascribed commensurate dignity and value, leaving no room for domination or value distinctions. However, Naess qualifies the idea by asserting that such egalitarianism exists only *in principle* “because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploiting, and suppression.”²¹ For him, when we use nature for legitimate, inescapable needs, it should be done with “deep seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life.”²² Thus, complete biospherical egalitarianism is an impossible ideal to live out fully at this time. Nevertheless, as a principle, it can serve as an ethical guide for our interaction with earth-other neighbors. What Naess describes is an

alternative way of looking at creation that refuses to objectify the other-than-human world. Earth-others must be used out of biological necessity, but they are perceived as subjects and not reduced to mere resources.

The ecofeminist vision then leads to an ethic that takes all matter – biotic and abiotic – seriously and ascribes equal dignity to the entirety of the created order.²³ This shared vision represents an alternative ontology of creation that recognizes the interconnectedness of all matter but refuses to ontologize others as pure objects for use. Oppression and domination are rejected as legitimate ways of being in relation to all earth-other neighbors even if use is necessary in some respect.²⁴ Value hierarchy is rejected and the entire creation is placed on an equal moral ground; all are morally considerable and none is intrinsically superior.

This brief discussion of the ecofeminist position leading to biospherical egalitarianism does not, however, justify its use as a model to construct a specifically Christian earth-ethic. To do this, we must see if ecofeminism and biospherical egalitarianism have any precedent or conceptual parallel within the Christian tradition itself.

The Biblical Witness and Biospherical Egalitarianism

In formulating a specifically Christian ethic, the models we use to speak of our relationship with creation must be supported by – or at least be compatible with – the foundational resource of the Christian tradition, namely biblical texts.²⁵ While many have suggested that the Christian tradition is largely responsible for allowing humans to exploit creation, this conclusion is simplistic.²⁶ Multiple biblical models support a strong earth ethic, though they may need reinterpretation or extension beyond the intent of the original authors in order to speak to our context today. Thus, while the Christian tradition has played a role in dominating creation, it also contains powerful resources to reverse negative effects and to lead the contemporary Christian community to take earth-care seriously.

While we could approach a biblical earth ethic from numerous angles and appeal to a multitude of scriptural texts, themes, and models, I restrict the focus here to one text/model: Paul's discussion of the eschatological salvation of all creation.²⁷

Eschatological Salvation in Romans 8:18-23

Romans 8:18-23 falls within the larger Pauline discussion of *human* salvation (Rom. 8:18-30). Although Paul claims a universal, cosmic salvation, human beings are clearly at the center of the salvific drama being played out in history and God is the primary actor. We cannot pretend that Paul's soteriology is developed to the extent it is used in this essay, and we must recognize that Paul's view of the universe is radically different from the view of modern cosmology.²⁸ However, despite the apostle's pre-scientific, anthropocentric/theocentric theology and the need to expand his thought through dialog with other sources, Paul can provide a clear, powerful resource for a Christian theology of earth-care.²⁹ I will present the text under discussion with a brief commentary.³⁰

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (NRSV)

Here Paul lays out the most inclusive soteriological statement in the New Testament. His discussion of the present time of imperfection and suffering on earth is characterized throughout with an eschatological hope for a future where the corporeal universe is renewed and glorified. He expresses hope for humanity's renewal and redemption as part of the divine plan. However, he is concerned not only with humanity but with all creation, anticipating a cosmic, eschatological redemption.

There are various interpretations of Paul's use of the term "creation" (*ktisis*) in this passage (e.g., the whole creation, humans, non-Christians only, Christians only, celestial beings, non-human creation only). However, the sense of the text seems to support the view that Paul means at least all biotic and abiotic nature, if not all of the cosmos including humanity.³¹ (In a

recent study, Cherryl Hunt, David Horrell, and Christopher Southgate assert that “with few exceptions, the consensus amongst recent writers is that *ktisis* refers to non-human creation with or without remainder.”³²) For Paul, creation finds itself in the drama of historical suffering and redemption as a direct result of human sin. The divine subjection of creation to frustration (v. 20) is a vague reference to the Yahwist creation myth and the alienation brought about between humans, God, and nature because of sin (Gen. 3:17-19, esp. v. 17, “Cursed is the ground because of you.”). As a result of sin, the entire cosmic order is disrupted and unable to find the freedom it desires.³³

However, “the creation was *not* subjected to frustration without any hope: the divine judgment included the promise of a better future, when at last the judgment would be lifted.”³⁴ This hope is that the cosmos will be “set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” This freedom is paralleled with the same freedom that Paul and other Christians long for – the redemption of matter through freedom from death and decay. However, if this passage refers to the entirety of the cosmos, it makes little sense to restrict the redemption to mere freedom from biological death. According to Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, the cosmic term *ktisis* and the narrative background of this passage (the entire narrative of Gen. 1-11, not just Gen. 1-3) “suggest that the *phthora* [decay] to which Paul alludes is a broader phenomenon than simply a reference to mortality.”³⁵ More specifically, the bondage to decay, if we consider Jewish Apocalyptic literature as a broad guide to Paul’s meaning, can refer to “corruption, disease, death, decay, suffering, and sorrow.”³⁶ This bondage also leads to “vanity of life in this age” and “major disruptions in the orderly operation of nature.”³⁷ Humans are *not* the only ones who suffer the consequences of the Fall and thereby receive divine redemption from this general trajectory toward decay, purposelessness, and disorder.

The work of Christ provides cosmic redemption for all creation, and Paul seems to hope that one day all members of the cosmos could find their own *telos* without restriction. While death may not be the sole reference here, it is certainly an important part of the divine redemptive scheme. In Paul’s thought, biological death is an aberration from the divine will.³⁸ Death is not a mistake inherent in the design of creation but the result of human sin warping the created order.³⁹

Paul recognizes death to be a biological reality (Rom 6:6; 7:2-3; cf. 8:10, 38; 14:7, 8); yet nowhere in Romans 5–8 do we receive the impression that he thinks of it simply as part of the created, *natural order*... Quite to the contrary, the apostle indicates that death is an *intrusive warp in the Creator's design* ... it is an aberration not just of the life of an individual but of all humanity (5:18-19) and even of the entire cosmos (8:20-22).⁴⁰

Thus, in Pauline soteriology eschatological salvation is thoroughly liberating for the cosmos. Paul calls all domination, suffering, and death into question, asserting that God is working to allow all matter to reach its intended *telos*.⁴¹

Paul's eschatological vision allows us to imagine new frontiers in which to expand his thought. Since Paul ultimately sees redemption and freedom from decay to be the fate of all matter, thus allowing all to flourish and find their own *telos*, his vision is basically compatible with biospherical egalitarianism, which says that all matter is morally considerable and entitled (as far as possible) to achieve its own end through its natural design. God is not interested in the redemption of any one species alone but cares for the entirety of creation. All creation is incorporated into its creator's vision and all are being drawn toward the same end.

If God is concerned for all creation, and no one thing is redeemed apart from the whole, it is difficult to maintain a value hierarchy in which any one part of creation is more valuable to God than another or to deny the moral considerability of any form of matter.⁴² Given both the contemporary environmental crisis threatening all life on the planet and the kinship of all matter established by the evolutionary sciences, Christians would do well to extend Paul's thought to a position of biospherical egalitarianism seeking to treat all matter with dignity and love according to its nature. Yet, we may use even stronger language than egalitarianism. In light of the nature of Christocentric love and since Pauline soteriology envisions freedom from death and decay, I suggest that the language of *nonviolence* and *pacifism* be added to our description, as violence denies an object the power to meet its own *telos*. To develop this idea, I turn now to the work of John Howard Yoder.

John Howard Yoder, Anabaptism, and Eco-pacifism

I use Yoder to finish constructing the eco-pacifism advocated throughout this essay through more precisely defining what it might mean to act nonviolently toward creation.⁴³ Yoder is known primarily for his advocacy of nonviolence between humans; he did not publish widely on creation ethics. Yet he is not silent on such matters. He comments on issues pertaining to creation ethics in several lesser-known publications and private papers.⁴⁴ And in his 1992 essay, “Cult and Culture after Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms,” he provides a clear response to contemporary issues regarding ethics and our earth-other neighbors.⁴⁵ I employ Yoder not as the embodiment of historical Anabaptism on such matters, but as one particularly constructive voice.

In his essay Yoder does not rehash what an Anabaptist theology of nature has always said, but rather employs the spirit of the Anabaptist vision to speak to a new situation, the environmental crisis.⁴⁶ He uses the resources of the tradition (e.g., pacifism), along with his biblical insights to imagine a theological model that could help Christians deal with the impact of humans on the earth’s sustainability. Yoder calls the Anabaptist tradition to progress in a direction more open to treating other-than-humans with dignity. He does not so much critique Anabaptism as combine its resources with other knowledge to create a novel, earth-friendly Anabaptist theology of nature. His is not the default Anabaptist position, as is sometimes erroneously assumed, but a constructive attempt to move the tradition in a positive direction.

In “Cult and Culture after Eden,” Yoder establishes a conceptual framework by which local communities can approach creation ethics.⁴⁷ His discussion is aimed at questions that “have to do with how to go on living when all the big questions [concerning the environment] are insoluble.”⁴⁸ Thus, given an inability to adequately address larger systemic issues, he asks how local communities might think about creation ethics.⁴⁹

First, Yoder rejects a Kantian approach based on “generalizability.” A Kantian ethic “says that I should make my decisions while asking whether the maxim that guides me should guide everyone. I should consider myself the prototypical actor in the human drama.”⁵⁰ Instead, Yoder insists that Christian ethics must represent its own distinct convictions as a value-bearing community. Second, he moves to create values based on Genesis 2-3. The

curse placed upon the cosmos in Gen. 3:17-19 is not accepted as the norm but as the way things have gone wrong. Instead of accepting things as they are, Yoder appeals to the creation myth in Genesis 2 of a primordial period in which the relationship between human and non-humans was characterized by dignity and mutuality, not by domination and exploitation. This utopian setting, however, does not last. He argues that the fall narrative of Genesis 3 represents a human attempt to reject its limited role in nature for one that is sovereign over creation. For Yoder, human rejection of finitude within the Yahwist's creation myth is not merely a piece of ancient wisdom for its own time but a cogent example of a destructive framework still ensnaring much of humanity.

Seizing the fruit is the claim to sovereignty; "you shall be Godlike" the serpent had said. This may be the point in the ancient cosmology where the metaphor will be most translatable to our times. In that we are not godlike, because we are not godlike, we must discover and yield to the laws and limits and balance that govern life; we are not free to remove vegetation or to add freon as we wish. We cannot graze goats across North Africa, or plow the prairies, or dam the Nile, or log the rainforests, without untoward surprises. To think that we control the system (arbitrarily) will mean seeing its (relative) control slip from our grasp. What was a fertile garden with whose natural potential we could co-operate becomes a desert peopled by weeds and thistles, demanding burdensome labor before yielding any fruit. Death is the final verdict condemning the effort to break free of the divinely intended harmony. Dust returns to dust; our final link with the soil is that having refused to harmonize with it when alive, we are reabsorbed by it when dead.⁵¹

After the fall, humanity is alienated from nature, unable to achieve fully the conditions of its utopian past yet able to recognize that its situation is not the ideal that God envisions. Yoder describes this through the Cain and Abel narrative, where Cain begins to exploit nature while Abel carries with him relics from a more "natural" past within creation. Yoder describes Cain's move to agricultural subsistence as an aberration from the free provisions of the utopian orchard and Abel's pastoral mode of life, both of which are

more “natural” than Cain’s tilling of the earth.⁵² Agriculture is not sinful but is a result of sin’s entrance into the world in Yoder’s interpretation of the myth. Thus, Cain’s manipulation of the earth is less natural (hence more violent, since it does not allow nature to proceed of its own accord) than Abel’s submission to the needs of the flock and the uncultivated provision for the flock by nature.⁵³ Cain’s sin, and the sin of humanity according to Yoder’s interpretation, is not that Cain tilled the soil but that he refused to recognize Abel’s way of life and sacrifice were fundamentally closer to the divine ideal.⁵⁴ Thus, for Yoder, the fall narrative, including the Cain/Abel legend, represents a movement away from the natural order toward a culture characterized not by peace and interconnectedness but by violence and domination.

Yoder discusses how the whole narrative of creation and fall is read today. There are “technological optimists” who believe that human progress continually leads us closer to an original, utopian past; “religious fatalists” who see the effects of the fall as unchanging until the destruction of the earth in the parousia; and “prophetic critics” who admit that the lives we live now are not the ideal that God desires for creation.⁵⁵ The latter do not believe (with the optimists) that we can recreate an edenic utopia in its fullness, but neither do they abandon creation (with the fatalists). Instead, they recognize the idealistic nature of the creation-fall myth, and rather than discount the vision of the past they seek at least to hearken to the divine ideal and let it shape their practice, even if there is no full realization of it.

Yoder seeks to fulfill the role of the “prophetic critic” and challenge both the optimists and fatalists. He rejects the idea that history as it has already unfolded is indicative of the progress of God’s will in time. He rejects this idea in light of our knowledge of the earth’s finitude and a more nuanced interpretation of the Bible. Alternatively, he suggests we can look to Jesus to critique the direction our collective history has taken. In Yoder’s vision, the restrained, reconciling, and compassionate ethic of Jesus is the answer to the disastrous history of industrialization and exploitation that has brought ecological crisis. Accordingly, the Anabaptist vision of Christocentric nonviolence is the model informing Yoder’s notion of a sustainable earth ethic. While he does not describe the richness and history of this vision, his commitment to Anabaptist-Mennonite pacifism is his starting point. “To

renounce violence is the first functional meaning of affirming creation or nature. To renounce violence in itself solves few problems, but it holds them open for solution.”⁵⁶

Yoder expands on nonviolence toward creation in his discussion of apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic dreams provide hope for a creation crushed by systems of violence and domination. But apocalypse is not simply about the future; it is “a call to creative response, denying the last word to a closed system determinism.”⁵⁷ The response envisioned promotes the sustainable, natural functioning of the cosmos without hindrance from humans. Apocalyptic language “promises that the wholesome potential of creation will one day be fulfilled.”⁵⁸ This eschatological vision further defines the cosmic nonviolence previously mentioned. Fulfillment seems connected to allowing creation to function on its own terms, apart from human interference. This interpretation is strengthened when we recall how Yoder reads the Cain and Abel narrative. Cain’s violence is connected to agriculture, which coerces the ground to produce certain things rather than allowing it to produce and grow of its own accord. Abel, despite sacrificing sheep, is seen as less violent, since his way of life more closely aligns with the natural unfolding of events as determined by the design of nature itself.⁵⁹ In Yoder’s vision, a nonviolent life toward nature suggests that we interfere as little as possible with the *telos* of our earth-other-neighbors, allowing them to be fulfilled on their own terms by designs that have emerged and will continue to emerge naturally.

For Yoder, the goodness of our communities and our future survival depend on finding creative responses to this vision: “The viability of our culture, as we hit the ceiling of the planet’s capacity, will be correlative with our finding ways for our time, as heirs of the apocalyptic hopes of all time, to envision the world that needs to be, on other grounds than that it is the necessary product of our past.”⁶⁰ That world has minimal human interference with creation. Yoder’s vision embraces nonviolence toward creation by allowing it to meet its own *telos* and function according to its own design whenever it is in our power to do so.

Yoder’s discussion of earth-care is compatible with, and strengthens, the conclusions outlined earlier in this discussion. Yoder uses nonviolence as an ideal for envisioning an earth-care ethic, applying peace in a way

not traditionally contemplated by Anabaptists. His view fits nicely with the eco-pacifist vision already described and adds a crucial dimension to it, specifying what it would mean to act nonviolently toward our earth-other neighbors. Viewing creation through these lenses leads to a strong, though abstract Anabaptist-Mennonite eco-pacifist ethic easily extended to any Christian tradition. This is an ethic where, in light of the redemption in store for the cosmos, all matter is seen as morally considerable and, as far as possible, allowed to flourish and achieve its own *telos*. Humans must obviously still consume resources, yet consumption would be justified only in a limited, sustainable way. Overcoming the complexities and abstractness of this position will require specific conversations about what constitutes violence toward particular earth-other neighbors.

Pragmatism and Eco-pacifism

Here I should say a word about the practicality of such a vision. An eco-pacifist theology is difficult to imagine, as the means of reaching one's own *telos* are often plainly at odds with the means of another. Death and decay also make sense to us because they are largely responsible for driving creation to its current form. Without supernovas and predatory relationships, the cosmos as we know it would not exist. With these considerations in mind, it is easy to dismiss the eco-pacifist ethic. Total eco-pacifism can be achieved only in an eschatological future where we experience radical ontological change allowing all to find their *telos* without interfering with others. Regardless of how this could happen, it remains a hope within many strands of the Christian tradition.⁶¹

Just how this future could come to fruition is not my concern here. Instead, I focus on what an eco-pacifist approach might mean for contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites and others in the Christian community. Some will claim the sheer impossibility of fully practicing eco-pacifism demonstrates its bankruptcy as a usable conceptual framework. While I concede it is impossible to *fully* practice it or to see it realized in the current created order, I do not think it without merit. Despite limitations, its eschatological character does not rule out its function as a moral guide, since Christians are encouraged to begin living according to eschatological values even though the Kingdom of God is an emergent reality only to be fully realized in the future.

There are two ways in which this ethic can impact our communities and lead to a more loving ethic toward our earth-other neighbors. First, the model of eco-pacifism can shape our attitudes toward resources that we must use out of necessity. Humans can at least respect and perhaps lament for that which we *must* use or kill for survival. This could be accomplished apart from a system of value hierarchy. Many living and non-living things would still be used but would not be ontologized as pure objects, as less important than us, or less deserving of dignity. We would thus use our resources wisely, sustainably, and with a mix of thanksgiving and lamentation, in hope of a coming world where all matter, without exception, can flourish.

Second, although eco-pacifism is impossible to fully live out at this time, we may begin to progressively adopt it by moving toward practices that interfere as little as possible with the being of our earth-other neighbors. Eco-pacifism can at least begin shaping our lives, regardless of whether it can be fully realized in the foreseeable future. This approach rejects value hierarchies and positively accepts the potential for changed relationships with our earth-other neighbors. Practical application of this ethic would need to be carefully decided by individual communities based on their understanding of individual earth-other neighbors. I make suggestions below, but the process will require extensive discussion, careful study, and creative imagination.

The eco-pacifist ethic functions as a sort of utopian vision, used by God to perpetually call human communities toward new and better ways of being human. This divine lure toward the fullness of eschatological life could be implemented in small steps as local communities deem it possible and appropriate.⁶² “We are thus offered a vision of something beyond ourselves and our past that calls us forward in each moment into a yet unsettled future, luring us with new and richer possibilities for our being. . . . Its power is that of an ideal, a power which is not coercive, but not, for that reason, ineffectual.”⁶³ The eco-pacifist vision is a hope to be fulfilled in the future, yet a constant challenge to live in ways that are increasingly better for us and our earth-other-neighbors. As Jay McDaniel puts it, it is the “divine dream” for what creation will one day become.

God has a new dream for us, which means that much of the violence we see in creation does not reveal God’s dream for us.

God's dream is that we become a people of radical nonviolence. While it is unreasonable to want or hope that animals can avoid killing one another, we can reduce the suffering we inflict on them and the numbers we kill, and we can avoid our wholesale assault on the Earth. We cannot simply turn to violence in creation as an excuse for our own, either in relation to one another, animals, or the Earth. We are beckoned by God toward an amplification of the dream of communion the likes of which the history of life on Earth has not yet seen.⁶⁴

We could continually see the vision's partial fulfillment as we promote the interests of other-than-humans and live more and more peacefully toward nature.

A Contextual-Eschatological Vegetarian Ethic

However helpful this ethic is, it remains largely abstract. Eco-pacifism thus far has referred broadly to an ethic seeing all matter as morally considerable and employing the ideal of nonviolence to treat all matter (insofar as possible) in accord with its intrinsic nature, allowing it to achieve its own *telos* and function according to its own design. While this is not bad (a conceptual framework must undergird concrete decisions), we must eventually make specific suggestions for implementing this ethic. While it has enormous implications for climate change and the functioning of ecosystems as a whole, I focus here on the lives of individual animals, a neglected topic in eco-theology.⁶⁵ I specifically address the use of animals as food, though their use in scientific research and entertainment is just as crucial to discuss.⁶⁶ My focus comes from a conviction that although we must consume some earth-other neighbors as resources, ending sentient life is more problematic than ending non-sentient life.⁶⁷ Non-sentient life is of course still morally considerable, but its basic nature leads us to prioritize using it.⁶⁸

From the outset, I should stress that this vegetarian ethic is not envisioned as historically absolute and binding. It is contextual, not ontological. I do not believe it can be embraced by all peoples or fully realized this side of the eschaton. Total nonviolence toward all other animal species is simply impossible at this time in history – and not just in terms of what humans eat. Numerous examples suggest particular communities *must*

rely on animals for food and other resources for survival. In geographical settings where climate conditions seriously limit agriculture, humans have no recourse but to eat other animals. This may be lamentable, but it cannot be condemned.⁶⁹ Animals are thus justifiably eaten out of biological and geographical necessity.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, nonviolence toward animals reflects the eschatological ethic of the Christian tradition. In view of the peaceful hope of the cosmos, Christians should at least take food ethics more seriously. Perhaps the place to start is to question the legitimacy of intensive factory farming as a means of obtaining animal-based food. Michael Northcott refers to the modern industrialization of meat production as “the most cruel and exploitative chapter in the history of humanity’s relationship with other animals.”⁷¹ The treatment of animals in these contexts is a far cry from traditional husbandry practices where, until an untimely death, an animal’s life was likely in line with its nature. In light of the eco-pacifist vision, industrial meat production is a highly suspect, if not abominable, practice. If humans continue to eat meat (along with eggs and dairy), they could at least yield to a more animal-friendly food ethic as a prophetic response to an industry that strips away the dignity of God’s creation.⁷²

However, we may choose to go a step further. The eco-pacifist vision encourages those who can exist without eating animal flesh to strongly consider doing so. Those embracing an ethic that rejects violence and envisions an eschatological future where all creation is liberated from the power of death and suffering should embrace peace to the greatest degree possible. We ought to avoid killing, causing suffering, and interfering negatively with animal lives whenever we can. In so doing, we embrace and expand the nonviolence of Christ by allowing the *telos* of animals to be fulfilled. If we can exist on a vegetarian diet, we should do so, refusing to participate in the untimely deaths and sufferings of animals. We ought to see them as earth-other neighbors who desire, like humans, to fulfill their *telos* by living out their days in species-specific abundance and peace.⁷³

Perhaps the call to rethink food ethics is a response to an ineffable divine lure toward a better way of being human.⁷⁴ Surely, even if we reject all animal food products, our ethic would not be commensurate with the eschatological hope for which creation longs. However, it would be a step

toward realizing the divine dream of a cosmos free of violence and suffering in which all matter can flourish.⁷⁵

Notes

¹ Some exceptions are Calvin Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite theology and ethic of creation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (1986): 387-403; Walter Klaassen, "'Gelassenheit' and Creation," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9.1 (Winter 1991): 23-35; and Calvin Redekop, ed., *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000).

² Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1992).

³ Two of the most important ethologists for the purpose of theological ethics are Marc Bekoff and Frans De Waal. See F.B.M. de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), and *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009); Marc Bekoff, *Animals Matter: A Biologist Explains Why We Should Treat Animals with Compassion and Respect* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007); and *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy – And Why They Matter* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007); Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁴ See, e.g., Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

⁵ These insights are saying something real about the cosmos. While it could be construed as a "Western" approach, the appeal I make here refers to ideas widespread among many cultures. This appeal to science represents the story of no one culture but can increasingly be said to be, with cultural modifications, the story of the universe itself, which obviously would include all humans.

⁶ By "earth-other neighbor," I refer to all the multiform manifestations of matter on the Earth, biotic life as well as abiotic aggregates.

⁷ Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974).

⁸ For a brief history of ecofeminism, see Charlene Spretnak, "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 3-14.

⁹ Val Plumwood, "Ecofeminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64 suppl. (1986): 121.

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 204.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹² The explanation of the link between value dualism, women, and nature is in Plumwood's words a "chicken and egg" problem. Is it, as Reuther claims, that the domination of women led to the domination of nature? Or was it the other way around? Did dualistic thinking cause women to be treated with less dignity? Or did women suffer from domination already, which in turn led to dualistic thought? See Val Plumwood, "Ecofeminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments," 123.

¹³ Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 46.

¹⁴ Warren defines oppression in terms of practices preventing self-determined entities from using resources to accomplish their goals. Thus, not all who are dominated (subordinated to others) are oppressed, as Warren assumes that plants, rivers, mountains and other such non-personal entities do not have self-determined choices or options. While all oppression involves domination, not all domination involves oppression. Despite the technical difference in definitions here, Warren still rejects both domination and oppression. See *ibid.*, 54-55, for a discussion. The difference is important but does not play a major role in this essay because of space constraints.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶ Hierarchical thinking is not itself condemned here. Some hierarchical thinking may be morally neutral or only descriptive. Organizing information, for example, is a benign process that orders and classifies according to hierarchies. Also, certain things are relatively better than other things in particular ways (e.g., homo sapiens is better at radically re-shaping the environment than a rock). Problems arise when these thought patterns are used to make judgments on the moral status or inherent worth of the individuals in question and to justify domination. The condemnation of hierarchy and dualism applies only to the moral considerability of matter. This protects us from moving towards a flat relativism where anything goes.

¹⁷ Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 46-47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹ This does not mean that rejecting domination or subordination outlaws use in any way. Use of resources does not automatically constitute domination. I discuss this further below.

²⁰ Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Biospherical egalitarianism does not lead to the conclusion that all bodies (living and non-living) should be treated identically. Instead, it asserts that no earth-other neighbor is intrinsically worthy of more or less moral consideration than another. All matter is to be considered and treated morally. This can, however, lead to multiple ways of acting toward different earth-other neighbors. Moral consideration of these neighbors must take into account the particular nature, needs, and (if possible) desires of the other. Thus, treating a river morally looks different from treating its fish morally.

²⁴ For an ecofeminist example of this alternative ontology that uses resources without objectifying them, see Val Plumwood, "Integrating Frameworks for Animals, Humans, and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis." *Ethics and the Environment* 5.2

(Autumn 2000): 285-322. For a response attempting to refute this view, see David Eaton, "Incorporating the Other: Val Plumwood's Integration of Ethical Frameworks," *Ethics and the Environment* 7.2 (2002): 153-93.

²⁵ Considering the polyphonic nature of the biblical witness, we need not establish that the entirety of the Bible is compatible. Instead, there ought to be at least some traditions within the Christian scriptures that could support biospherical egalitarianism.

²⁶ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-07. For a discussion of issues involved here, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 67-116.

²⁷ Other such models/texts helpful in forming a creation ethic are the creation, fall, and flood narratives; Sabbath and jubilee; proper procedures for sacrifice and handling animal blood; Isaiah's peaceable kingdom; the renewing of the earth in 1 Peter and Revelation; the kenosis theology of the New Testament, and the incarnation and sacramental nature of all matter following from it; and the triune nature of God as expressed in the Christian tradition.

²⁸ Paul's universe is not chaotic and evolving but intentionally fashioned and controlled by God. Creation is fashioned in a determined way, cursed by God, and suffers because of human sin. Its redemption is dependent on human redemption and is the action of God alone. God's direct intervention is at odds with much theological/scientific thinking in light of contemporary physics. For an example of a non-interventionist theology of divine action, see especially Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) and Phillip Clayton, "Natural Law and Divine Action: The Search for an Expanded Theory of Causation," *Zygon* 39. 3 (2004): 615-36. For more technical scientific perspectives on divine actions, see the following in the *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* series produced by Vatican Observatory Publications in the Vatican State: Robert Russell et al., *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress* (Volume 6, 2008); *Quantum Mechanics* (Volume 5, 2002); *Neuroscience and the Person* (Volume 4, 1999); *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology* (Volume 3, 1998); *Chaos and Complexity* (Volume 2, 1995); *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature* (Volume 1, 1993).

²⁹ Unlike anthropocentrism, theocentrism may not seem like a problem in this text. However, if God is the sole actor in the drama of liberation, then the role of humans, imperative in regard to anthropogenic climate change, could be dismissed or downplayed. Humans must be seen as actors in this liberating drama. Thus, not all the principles outlined in Paul's letter are helpful. Rather, the general orientation of the passage is our focus.

³⁰ For a full account of this passage and its relation to eco-theology, including references to significant other sources in biblical studies, see Cherryll Hunt, David Horrell, and Christopher Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19-23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 59.2 (2008): 546-79. For an excellent exegesis of the passage in light of Jewish apocalyptic works, see Harry Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8:19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Library of New Testament Studies 336 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 171-209.

³¹ Paul's use here likely does not include humans, and definitely does not include non-physical creation such as angels, demons, or the heavenly realm. For a history of the interpretation and issues involved in the exegesis, see Hahne, 176-81. See also Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra?," 546-55.

³² Ibid., 558.

³³ Though there are distinct nuances of such a theology, this general idea is common throughout Jewish apocalyptic literature. See Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 35-168.

³⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, 1978), 414. Emphasis added.

³⁵ Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra?," 561.

³⁶ Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 212.

³⁷ Ibid., 212-13.

³⁸ C. Clifton Black, "Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5-8." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.3 (1986): 413-33.

³⁹ Robert Jewett says it is probable that "Paul has in mind the abuse of the natural world by Adam and his descendants." Humans thus play an even more active role in the domination of nature in Jewett's reading. The suffering of nature is not just general cosmic disruption but a direct result of human domination. See Jewett's *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 513.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 429-30. See also Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation*, 212.

⁴¹ The "intended *telos*" of different forms of matter may be debated, especially between ancient and modern sources (e.g., in ancient sources the *telos* of the other-than-human is often to serve the human). While I will not parse out the differences here, the *telos* of nature is shown below to be very important for a theology of eco-pacifism.

⁴² God may be concerned for various forms of matter in different ways, according to their nature, but it is not easily said that God is more concerned with one part of creation than another.

⁴³ Relegating the discussion to one theologian is not for a lack of writing within the Anabaptist community. Yoder's ethic is not well known, so it ought to be discussed. But see also Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite theology and ethic of creation"; Klaassen, "'Gelassenheit' and Creation"; and Redekop, *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (all details in Note 1 above).

⁴⁴ John Howard Yoder, "The Impact of Evolutionary Thinking on Theology" (paper presented to Mennonite Graduate Fellowship, Chicago, 1959), and "Theological Perspectives on 'Growth with Equity,'" in *Growth with Equity: Strategies for Meeting Human Needs*, ed. Mary Evelyn Jegen and Charles K. Wilber (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 9-16; Thomas L. Shaffer and John Howard Yoder, *Moral Memoranda from John Howard Yoder: Conversations on Law, Ethics, and the Church between a Mennonite Theologian and a Hoosier Lawyer* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

⁴⁵ John Howard Yoder, "Cult and Culture after Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings, Human Values and the Environment Conference* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters,

1992), 1-10.

⁴⁶ While historic Anabaptism does speak to a theology of nature, an environmental theology such as Yoder constructs was not even possible before the rise of the environmental movement and such publications as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968). Until the rise of this movement, no conceptual framework existed for the specifics of the theology Yoder constructs. With few precedents for a modern theology of nature, he uses resources at his disposal to envision one. Going back to the roots of Anabaptism shows that while some thinkers took physical matter seriously (e.g., Hut and the Marpeck circle), they still operated in a Thomistic, hierarchical understanding where all matter served the interests of humans. Not until the advent of modern science was this idea thoroughly replaced by a more interconnected, egalitarian view.

⁴⁷ Though he addresses primarily local Christian communities, he indicates that nothing makes this framework inherently unintelligible for other communities. "The themes I propose to attend to are 'Christian' in the setting where I see them, although I can see nothing that would keep them from being shared by Jews or by original Americans ... they take account of a value bearing community which is neither the same as, nor in control of, the world as a whole." Yoder, "Cult and Culture after Eden," 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ This does not discount the need to address larger systemic issues. Yoder was speaking in a specific context, leaving systemic questions for others to handle. For systemic issues, see for example Northcott, *A Moral Climate*.

⁵⁰ Yoder, "Cult and Culture after Eden," 1.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵² Yoder sees agriculture as close to nature but not natural. What was "natural" in the myth was the reception of fruit from the orchard of Eden and Abel's submission to the "natural" wandering of his flock that ate the food which the earth provided ("Cult and Culture after Eden," 5).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "The sin of Cain ... began when he refused to recognize that his brother Abel was closer to the beginnings and closer to the God of the natural than he was. But he deepened that offense and estrangement, and made it irrevocable, when he chose not to share in Abel's sacrifice of a sheep from the flock; instead, in a macabre parody of the killing of an innocent sheep, he sacrificed his innocent brother." Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ Presumably this view could be extended to refusing unnecessary killing of our earth-other neighbors, and it undercuts living matter's ability to reach its own *telos*. That Yoder does not reject Abel's sacrifice of sheep does not preclude this. Yoder's vision does not look backward but forward. The past does not determine the character of our present and future ethic. However, it is difficult to determine what Yoder would have thought about killing animals.

⁶⁰ Yoder, "Cult and Culture after Eden," 9.

⁶¹ A helpful discussion of difficulties with Paul's theology is John Cobb and David J. Lull, *Romans* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 124-27. Cobb and Lull agree that eschatological hope for the future is crucial, though the form it will take is uncertain. They posit a continuing life after death in which Paul's vision is fulfilled, and they reject theologies that spurn the concept of life after death or restrict soteriology to the historical period.

⁶² The language of divine "lure" is prominent in process theology. See John Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 42-66. Cobb also discusses utopian ethics and ideals as a guide to human imagination away from slavery to the past towards ever better future possibilities. These possibilities are never fully realized but serve to pull humans to a progressively better ethic in this world.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁴ Jay McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 109.

⁶⁵ Species as a whole are often discussed, but these discussions usually focus on exotic or endangered species. Species preservation remains a crucial issue, but not at the expense of the lives of individual creatures with whom we regularly interact. However, a growing number of theologians focus on individual creatures. See, for example, Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995) and *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). Also see the essays in Charles Robert Pinches and Jay McDaniel, eds. *Good News for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) and Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, eds., *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals* (London: SCM Press, 2009). In "'Gelassenheit' and Creation," Walter Klaassen suggests *Gelassenheit* should be reinterpreted to reject the "long tradition of violence of humans toward the natural world, violence against the soil, against animals, birds, trees, water and air" (32).

⁶⁶ See Hunt, Horrell, and Southgate, "An Environmental Mantra?" See also the essays in David Grumett and Rachel Muers, eds., *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), especially those by Christopher Southgate, "Protological and Eschatological Vegetarianism," and Michael Northcott, "Eucharistic Eating, and Why Many Early Christians Preferred Fish." For a broader perspective on the ethics of eating animals, including the ecological impact of a diet centered on animal flesh, see Northcott, *A Moral Climate*, 232-66.

⁶⁷ This does not imply that animal life is inherently worth more than non-animal life or abiotic matter. It simply acknowledges that the difference allows for different concrete practices. The presence of suffering in animals leads me to prioritize their well-being, since the *telos* of some things (e.g., plants) must be interfered with for life to continue.

⁶⁸ This is an exceedingly complex issue. No human (or any being) can exist without consuming resources. At some point a detailed discussion on resource use, and when it is justifiable to thwart the *telos* of an earth-other neighbor, is needed. The answer would undoubtedly be different according to the parts of creation in view. This may lead to dualistic ethics like mine (e.g., animals vs. plants vs. non-living matter), but it would not deny moral considerability.

I suggest two guiding principles here. First, we may kill when it is biologically necessary for survival. Humans and some animals must kill plants in order to survive. In these cases, death is lamentable yet inevitable. This also protects the eco-pacifist ethic from being employed to justify killing humans as a result of conflict (e.g., war is not a biological necessity to survival). Second, if we can avoid killing our earth-other neighbors who are sentient and capable of suffering, we absolutely should. Since we must use some resources and thus interfere with their *telos*, the difference between those that can suffer and those that cannot is crucial. Matter that has become aware of itself and consequently can suffer calls for more ethical consideration. The dividing line between what is or is not sentient and can suffer is a further complication (can a bivalve, such as a clam, suffer?), but at least “higher” mammals clearly fall into the sentient-and-capable-of-suffering category. Sustainable use can be our guide for nonviolence. Thus, unless it is necessary, eco-pacifists would resist killing that which can suffer and would support (as far as possible) only sustainable use of all other resources. This line of thinking flows out of what we have seen in Yoder.

⁶⁹ Even building houses is bound to disrupt some animal life. No way of life we can imagine will completely avoid harm to some animals and other forms of life.

⁷⁰ Biological and geographical necessity would still not justify the practices of modern industrialized factory farming. When humans must take animal life, it must be done with reverence and respect. The importance of the life blood of all animals in the Hebrew Bible indicates that the taking of life is to be done only in view of the inherent worth of God’s creation. If the eating of animals is allowed, it must be construed and carried out as a form of sacred eating. Southgate also makes a strong case for traditional/cultural justifications for eating animals. See “Protological and Eschatological Vegetarianism,” in *Eating and Believing*. I am not completely convinced by his argument, though it must be taken seriously. Biological and geographical necessity seems the better way to determine the justifiable eating of animals.

⁷¹ Northcott, “Eucharistic Eating, and Why Many Early Christians Preferred Fish,” in Grumett and Muers, eds., *Eating and Believing*.

⁷² Simply cutting down on animal-based food is a move toward a better earth-ethic. Because of the ubiquity of “meat” eating in industrial societies, I am pessimistic that large numbers of people will become vegetarians. However, cutting down on meat or choosing to buy from small, local farming operations is a step toward what I am proposing. In terms of eggs and dairy, I find it difficult to argue that consuming animal products is morally wrong if a result of ethically based relationships of mutualism. Mutualism is ubiquitous in biological life, and if done ethically it cannot be questioned in the same way as meat-eating. The support of ethical mutualism is perhaps one way to dialog with Southgate’s concern that vegetarianism too strongly breaks the relationships between animals and humans (see his “Protological and Eschatological Vegetarianism” in *Eating and Believing*). Mutualism could facilitate the human/animal friendship and care that Southgate supports, without unnecessary animal deaths.

⁷³ This does nothing to prevent predation and other forms of natural deaths; predation is in fact necessary for the *telos* of some animals to be fulfilled. This ethic cannot be extended beyond our own species. The eco-pacifist ethic described here indicates a partial fulfillment

that is incomplete on this side of the eschaton. While death through predation and disease will surely continue, humans do not have to participate in furthering and multiplying animal deaths.

⁷⁴ I do not want to suggest that vegetarianism is simply and always ethical. Growing and transporting vegetables can be done in ways that are ultimately harmful to the Earth and human well-being.

⁷⁵ I thank Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, Sam White, Ted Koontz, and Luke Gascho for their insights on earlier drafts of this essay.

This fall, Matthew Eaton will begin PhD studies at the University of St. Michael's College in the Toronto School of Theology with a concentration in Theology and Ecology.

Yorifumi Yaguchi. *The Wing-Beaten Air: My Life and My Writing*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2008.

Part memoir of growing up in World War II Japan, part spiritual autobiography, and part poetry collection, poet Yorifumi Yaguchi's *The Wing-Beaten Air* braids these strands together in deceptively simple prose to create a thought-provoking meditation on practicing peace and intercultural understanding in contemporary cross-cultural contexts.

Yaguchi was a third-grader when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Through the candid eyes of a child, he reveals the ways in which warfare becomes intertwined with ordinary life. He shows us how he and his classmates were captivated by the jingoistic rhetoric of their time, how Shinto, the traditional Japanese folk religion, was co-opted into supporting a cult of the Emperor's divinity, how as a young man he was introduced to Christianity and came to embrace Mennonite pacifism, and how as an adult he became a cross-cultural ambassador in his roles as a poet, teacher of literature, lay minister, and peace activist.

Yaguchi's story is fascinating in itself, but his book is organized more as a series of interlocking meditations interspersed with poems than as a chronological account of his life. Much is left to the reader's imagination. In the manner of a poet, the themes tend to coalesce around images. Yaguchi shares these insights in poems imbedded in the text. For instance, he says little in expository prose about some of the most dramatic moments of his life, such as the death of his father, but invites the reader to experience these moments through poetry.

Grandson of a Buddhist priest on one side and the great-grandson of a Shinto priest on the other, Yaguchi also discovered threads of Christianity woven throughout his ancestry. Disillusioned with the failure of Buddhism in Japan to practice its teachings on peace during World War II, he likewise rejected Christianity as a warlike religion until he met Mennonite missionary Ralph Buckwalter. Yaguchi was so astounded by a form of Christianity which obeyed Christ's teaching not to kill that he was baptized a Mennonite in 1958. Yaguchi speaks of his Christian conversion more of as an embrace of passionate conviction than as a rejection of Buddhism. He mentions

that his Buddhist relatives respected his Christian conviction and that he respected their spirituality.

Trained as a teacher of literature and already a published poet, Yaguchi spent several years in Indiana in the 1960s at the Mennonite Seminary, where he met Harold Bender, Howard Charles, Millard Lind, and John Howard Yoder. He also recalls some amusing anecdotes of dorm living and describes meeting a full range of Anabaptists, from Amish who divided men and women in their congregations to French Mennonites who knew how to laugh and enjoy wine.

Of particular to writers and readers of contemporary poetry will be Yaguchi's memories of exchanges with a stunning array of American poets. Alicia Ostriker, Robert Bly, William Stafford, and Gary Snyder all came to read in Japan at Yaguchi's invitation. He recalls visiting the Ainu museum in Hokkaido with Robert Bly, remembers Jean Janzen writing a poem about soaking in the hot baths with Misuko, Yaguchi's wife, and portrays William Stafford as a fellow pacifist Christian and kindred spirit: "both of us loved to write on small things in ordinary voices" (139).

In 1976 Yaguchi spent another year in the United States, this time as a Visiting Scholar at SUNY Buffalo, aided by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies. During this year he learned to know Robert Creely, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Lucien Stryk, Philip Whalen, R.S. Thomas and Denise Levertov, the latter two sharing his visions of Christian spirituality and peace.

That Mennonite Christianity is a religion of peace is abundantly clear to Yaguchi – and that Mennonite literature should be a literature of peace is also his firm belief. His poems of peace are often confrontational – entering the perspective of the "enemy" in order to discover his humanity, the human kinship of the poet with the being he fears or abhors. He has followed through on his Christian vision of peace by becoming an activist in contemporary Japan, where teachers can be removed from their jobs for refusing to teach the jingoistic national anthem to their students.

When Yaguchi visited Goshen College in 2002, he asked my students if they knew the work of Gary Snyder, whom he considered a Mennonite poet because of his commitment to peace. "Snyder is a Mennonite name,

no?” he said playfully. Thus he encouraged them to “see the self in the other” as he reminded them of the Mennonite legacy and commitment to peace. *The Wing-Beaten Air* works this way on the reader as well.

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Stuart Murray. *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010.

This book is about Anabaptism’s evolution into “Neo-Anabaptism” or “hyphenated Anabaptism.” It offers perspectives on a modestly successful church planting movement over recent decades in Britain and Ireland, and offers practical examples of church planting in an Anabaptist key. Its ideas deserve to be scrutinized and discussed broadly by Mennonites and others interested in how Anabaptism can offer vibrant and relevant approaches to faith community formation. Despite the book’s title, the author notes, alas, that “there is strictly no such thing as ‘naked Anabaptism’” (43); it is always culture-clad.

Murray is optimistic, if occasionally boastful, about Anabaptism’s prospects in “post-Christendom,” suggesting that “Jesus might be making something of a comeback” (56). He trumpets Anabaptist tenets in a way that sometimes sounds anti-ecumenical or exudes an air of triumphalism. Much of his book discusses seven core “convictions” of the Anabaptist Network in Britain and Ireland, with examples of how they reflect new forms of Anabaptism (43-134).

The book seeks to answer the questions “What is an Anabaptist? Where did Anabaptism come from? What do Anabaptists believe? Can I become Anabaptist? What is the difference between Anabaptists and Mennonites?” (16). Much of it aims to convince readers that Anabaptism now means various things, some having no reference to historic Anabaptism. A primary aim is to inspire North American Mennonites either to reclaim

aspects of ancestral faith or to envision how it can be re-clothed. An underlying notion is that there is a connection – or that a stronger connection should be made – between early Anabaptist tenets and the emerging church movement.

Although providing an overview of historic Anabaptism, the book looks beyond traditional beliefs and practices. Murray's premise is that Anabaptism's rejection of Christendom and its attempt to form alternative faith communities is the best vehicle for navigating into post-Christendom and postmodern society, and that emerging church movements would do well to learn from historic Anabaptism. This premise deserves fuller explanation, especially since the author inverts the basic tenet of Anabaptist faith formation – believer's baptism. The new mode of church growth becomes "belonging before believing."

While the book offers insights into salient features of Neo-Anabaptism, some examples border on the ludicrous, such as that of the lesbian pot-smoker who dropped a cannabis habit and joined a conservative Baptist church after merely reading the Gospel of Luke, a decision apparently taken not because of any church community influence (59). Is this an instructive example of Anabaptism? "Belonging before believing" aims to facilitate missional activity, suggesting Christian communities need to be believer-friendly before enforcing beliefs or behaviors (60). Murray militates against traditional exclusivity and the infamous ban and shunning.

"Belonging before believing," however, implies a fundamental erosion of the traditional basis for believer's baptism, namely repentance. Is this inverted approach not a Constantinian wolf in a postmodern sheep's clothing? Although Murray offers interesting examples of how it works in his context, these cases are not overly convincing, nor have this reviewer's experiences of it in North America shown it to be fruitful. There is no shortage of churches that desperately try to swing their doors ever wider, even removing them entirely, in the hope that someone, anyone, might enter and call themselves a member. In Canada neither Quakerism nor the United Church can point to lack of liberality, refusal to allow diversity, or enforcement of doctrinal conformity as the causes of low membership and sharp decline in numbers. Far from paving a way to reach post-Christendom, Murray has bought into the very principle making religious community now

so uncommon, namely commitment to a shared set of beliefs.

The clarion call to repentance resounding throughout early Anabaptist writings scarcely has a role in Neo-Anabaptism, and is heard not as a call to recognize personal or even corporate sin but to admit guilt for being complicit with Christendom! (81) For example, one man imbibed “Anabaptist values” over many years while participating in a community of faith but received water baptism only shortly before his death (similar to the experience of Emperor Constantine). What did his baptism signify? In such examples the author fails to grasp another related identity marker of early Anabaptism: the presence of the Spirit in the believer’s life. That element was a *sine qua non*, yet it plays a marginal role in Murray’s description of the British-Irish movement.

While this book may not be useful for applying core Anabaptist tenets either to the contemporary context in North America or beyond western societies, its ideas deserve to be debated. Church groups should see it more as a basis for discussing what growth means today than as a resource for growth. Though inappropriate for studying historical Anabaptism, with its British and Irish “Neo-Anabaptism” examples this volume could be helpful for comparative studies in ministry classes.

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Richard Kauffman. *An American in Persia: A Pilgrimage to Iran*. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2010.

If you have always wanted to go to Iran and enter into conversations about life, faith, and relations with America, Canada, and the West, then this book is for you. Its pages reveal the core content of conversations you would have had, ranging across cultural, political, religious, and informal themes in a spirit of dialogue and learning. Each encounter maintains a respect for others’ perspectives along with critical reflection that nuances both Western and Iranian perceptions.

Sadly, though, after reading this book without an actual visit, you would miss out on the rich food, hospitality, smiles, and generosity that would hold you graciously while meeting the firm resolution of convictions strongly held and willingly communicated by your Iranian hosts. Kauffman captures well the will to engage and be understood that I experienced in my year in Iran.

The encounters presented in this volume range from conversations with people on the street to meetings at the foreign ministry, from Muslim clerics in Qom to people in Tehran who regret many aspects of clerical rule. At a time when it is even more difficult for westerners to visit Iran, the book opens a window on the interaction of perspectives behind the current conflict and historical tensions, and is a start at building a bridge of perceptions.

Kauffman names his challenge in the introduction: “There is a saying that if you go to Iran for a month you’ll write a book; stay six months and you’ll write an article; but if you stay a year you won’t write anything” (14). He positions himself well as an observer and author. Although he declares that he is “not an authority on Iran,” he writes with one eye on Iranian interests, another eye on American/Canadian/Western interests, and a third eye that at times is objectively critical of both sides. He takes the reader into the nuances behind the media’s often two-dimensional, polarizing coverage of Iran.

An American in Persia is structured as a narrative travelogue. Chapter themes range across hospitality, human rights, head coverings, interfaith relations, Mennonite Central Committee’s role in the country as “the little NGO that could,” and presentations of context from history to current events, and from religious identity to political challenges.

One of the more gripping images concerns the Iran-Iraq war and arises during a visit to the Red Crescent Society by the delegation Kauffman was on: “In one room remembering the war victims there was a copy of a computer printout that recorded the identities of all the people known to have been killed or injured in this war, a printout that must have been at least six inches thick—a stark reminder of the brutal hostility between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini” (54). Twenty-plus nations, including many Western nations, sold weapons to both sides of this conflict during the 1980s.

There are three helpful appendices. The first, written by David Cortright, outlines eight points about Iran's nuclear program, while the second is a reflection by Thomas Finger on Jesus and Shi'ite understanding of the Mahdi (Messiah). A third appendix gives a timeline of Iran's history over the last century.

I offer one serious caution for readers and the author. "Dissidents—activists, journalists and academics who criticize the government—are squelched," writes Kauffman. "Indeed, they are often imprisoned, and sometimes killed" (96). My caution takes the form of a call to connect such observations (also offered on pages 49, 59, and 60) about the political context in Iran with publishing quotations of negative political content with attributions. This practice can put sources in danger and is a questionable form of reporting on dialogue in sensitive contexts.

Missing from the book are reflections on how the deeply held Iranian sense of honor, dishonor, and saving face functions in international and interfaith relations. (There are also a few errata: page 84 should list Iraq, Iran, and North Korea instead of "Iran, Iran and North Korea.")

Overall, the author's writing style is crisp, vibrant, and engaging. I finished many chapters feeling I would like to have been part of the conversations reported. This volume could be offered to friends who want to understand the nuances of Iranian-North American relations better. The chapters would make good conversation starters for discussion groups interested in the themes of Christian international engagement, Muslim-Christian encounter, and international relations and peacebuilding.

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Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner, eds. *The New Yoder*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

The New Yoder is a substantial collection of essays gathered to demonstrate the durability of John Howard Yoder's theology and ethics beyond the particular contexts in which he thought, the immediate concerns about which he wrote, and the specific theologians with whom he conversed. No attempt is made to reinterpret Yoder for a new generation or to universalize him for a new context. Instead, the essays reflect a discernable trend among a newer generation of scholars to relocate conversations with Yoder further outside the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

The introduction by editors Peter Dula and Chris Huebner in which the "old Yoder" is distinguished from the "new Yoder" is key to understanding the nature of this collection – as well as being a valuable resource itself. The "old Yoder" is characterized as pre-1990s work in theology and ethics set against the framework established by Troeltsch and embraced by Rauschenbusch and the Niebuhr brothers. Here Yoder defends the claim that Christian pacifism is realistic and effective (x-xii). The "new Yoder" is about constructing dialogue between Yoder and post-structuralists such as Gilles Deleuze and Paul Virilio, deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and post-colonialists such as Edward Said and Jeffrey Stout on "larger constructive enterprise[s]" (xv). These new interlocutors take for granted that Yoder challenged the terms of the debate rather than simply offering new solutions under the existing terms. Essays by Daniel Boyarin on diaspora ethics and Peter Blum engaging Yoder with Foucault and Nietzsche are apt illustrations. One outcome is that a broader understanding of peace emerges to encompass epistemology, aesthetics, and identity.

Only five of the fifteen essays are previously unpublished. The ten essays reproduced here have been diligently selected for the theme of new trajectories of engagement with Yoder, and it is handy to have them in one collection. But the real scholarly contribution is the original essays, where the conversation enriches the understanding of both Yoder and his interlocutor.

J. Alexander Sider discusses the politics of memory in forgiveness

and reconciliation. He contends that Miroslav Volf's "nontheoretical act of nonremembering" perpetuates the necessity of a modern subjective agent whereas Yoder concentrates on "communal memory as a necessary constituent of peaceable practice" and forgiveness as a doxological act, an approach more consistent with the core commitments in the Christian story (167). Jonathan Tran, taking a cue from critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno, compares Yoder with political and social ethicist Jeffrey Stout on the notion of laughter as a sign of hope. While Stout finds laughter and hope as Christians participate in the democratic tradition to refine it, Yoder finds them in the tension between promise and fulfillment, eschatology and ecclesiology (253-70).

The "secular character" of Yoder's "breaching strategy" is explored in Daniel Barber's essay on epistemological violence. Talal Asad, an anthropologist and post-colonial thinker who explores secularism and religion, is employed to discern in Yoder's anti-universalism and epistemological nonviolence a non-totalizing secularity alongside his non-Constantinian Christianity (271-93). Joseph R. Wiebe sees a tension between Romand Coles's radical democracy and democratic process and Yoder's radical discipleship and the person of Christ Jesus. Rowan Williams's "penumbral vision" of a fractured socio-political center and non-coercive witness is a reminder that we often "fail to embody the politics of Jesus and that others suffer our failures" (316).

According to Nathan Kerr, Michel de Certeau helps flesh out Yoder's claim that "the Christian community is from the outset and without remainder to be a missionary community"; Certeau's "heterological account" of Christian exile, diaspora, and homelessness provides the "space" for politics of resistance (326). Kerr prefers Yoder's understanding of Jesus as constitutive of the missionary community over Certeau's view that Jesus is merely generative of Christian community but then he withdraws (327). In Yoder's view exile is not a strategy, it *is* mission.

The notion of "the new Yoder" is somewhat misleading and presumptuous. As even the editors note, there is no significant shift in Yoder himself (ix). What is new is Yoder being brought into conversation with continental postmodern thinkers (Yoder himself did not choose to engage these contemporaries). Nor is the book even about new scholarship in this

area, given that almost half the essays were published half a decade or more ago. As already suggested, this book's main contribution is the previously unpublished pieces. Of those, four of five represent writers theologically formed at Duke University (Nathan Kerr is the exception). Perhaps a better title would be "The New Duke Yoder," since the book represents one set of new engagements with Yoder.

A second limitation is that despite the centrality in these essays of the witnessing community as the medium and message of Good News, most people in that community will find the book inaccessible. Deconstructionist and post-structuralist schools of thought are notoriously heady and complex while theological engagement with them is relatively new. Nevertheless, for scholars already familiar with those schools of thought these scholarly pieces from and for academic contexts provide an important resource engaging Yoder's Christian pacifism in ever broader theological circles.

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James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Throughout history many Christians have felt compelled to change the world for the better. But should Christians feel so compelled? And if so, how should they engage the world, especially in our own time? James Davison Hunter provides a fascinating exploration of these questions, and provides answers that resonate rather closely with the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

The first essay of three in this volume focuses on culture and cultural change. Hunter objects to the common understanding of culture as a worldview, or as the values held by the majority of people, together with the choices people make on the basis of these values. This approach focuses too much on ideas, is too individualistic, and assumes that cultural transformation depends on personal transformation occurring from the

bottom up. Hunter proposes a view of culture embedded in historical forces, institutions, and networks of powerful individuals. Cultural change can be brought about only from the top down, when networks of elites and the institutions they lead coalesce.

Hunter's analysis would be strengthened if he were to see his task as *refining* the common understanding, rather than proposing "an alternative view" (32). His own analysis is idea-driven (32, 35). While stressing the institutional power component of culture, he nonetheless admits there is a dialectical relation between ideas and institutions (34) and is forced to say that "ideas do have consequences" (40).

Hunter's alternative view no doubt explains why so many Christians today clamor for power and political influence. Indeed, there has been "a tendency toward the politicization of nearly everything" in the development of American political culture over the past century (102). Essay Two devotes a chapter each to three expressions of these tendencies. The conservative Christian right is the most obvious expression of evangelicals seeking political means to "preserve, protect and defend the Judeo-Christian values that made this the greatest country in history" (126). (For a recent analysis of the Christian right in Canada see Marci McDonald, *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* [Random House Canada, 2010].) The progressive Christian left has a very different agenda – equality and social justice. While this agenda was at the forefront of mainline denominations in the past, the recent resurgence of the Christian left is located in progressive evangelicals; its most visible figure is Jim Wallis (137). But the new Christian left is as much a power play as the Christian right, finding its home in the Democratic Party, just as the Christian right is associated with the Republican Party (144).

Interestingly, Hunter identifies the neo-Anabaptists as a significant third approach to political theology. For John Howard Yoder, acknowledged as key to the development of the neo-Anabaptist vision and for making it intellectually respectable (152), Jesus modeled an alternative relationship with the reigning powers of the day. He rejected the temptation to exercise political power, and instead challenged and overcame the "principalities and powers" by being a suffering servant and dying on the cross. Christians are called to follow Jesus' model, separating themselves from the world and

its methods, living as “resident aliens,” and being an alternate worshipping community.

Hunter faults neo-Anabaptists for succumbing to the same politicization as the Christian right and left. Christian ethics comes down to “the politics of Jesus,” and the Christian community is still seen as “a political reality” (162). Here he is quite unfair to Yoder and the neo-Anabaptists, who understand “politics” in a very different way when applied to Jesus and the Christian community. Hunter also overplays the separatist tendencies of neo-Anabaptists, and unfairly criticizes them for being “so relentlessly negative,” even “world-hating,” and for failing to acknowledge what is good and beautiful in the world (164, 174). Much in contemporary society deserves strong critique, however, and such critique can be coupled with an equally strong affirmation of what is good and beautiful.

Indeed, Hunter’s own proposal for a proper understanding of Christian witness has much in common with the Anabaptists. He shares a deep concern about Christians using political power to bring about cultural change (95, 172). What is needed is a radical rethinking of our theology of power. Power is inherent in human nature and inescapable (177, 179), but political power is not the only, or even the predominant, expression of power. Jesus exerted social or relational power, submitting to God, rejecting status and reputation, showing compassion, and dealing non-coercively with those outside the community of faith (187-93). This becomes the model for Hunter’s paradigm of a post-political witness to the world, a theology of faithful presence outlined in Essay Three.

At times Hunter seems to advocate that Christians should give up trying to change the world. He suggests we should “abandon altogether” talk of “redeeming the culture,” “advancing the kingdom,” or “transforming the world” (280). But surely there is something wrong here; our Lord taught us to pray that God’s will be done on earth. What Hunter is really concerned about is improper *means*. He agrees with neo-Anabaptists on rejecting a Constantinian approach to engagement with the world with its proclivity towards domination and politicization (280). Such an approach tends towards either triumphalism or despair (234). A humbler, more patient orientation towards a faithful incarnational presence in all spheres of life is all that God asks of us. He will take care of changing the world (241).

Hunter seeks to offer a radically new paradigm of engagement with the world (270, 278). But in the final essay he recounts examples of Christians as a faithful presence in various spheres (266-69), and is forced to concede that the neo-Anabaptists have got it right, at least partly (234, 283). Perhaps a more generous reading of both the neo-Anabaptists and the Christian right and left might have made for a shorter, more positive and constructive analysis.

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Theron F. Schlabach. *War, Peace and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics*. Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009.

Theron Schlabach has written a much-needed biography of Mennonite ethicist and church leader Guy F. Hershberger. Considering the significant body of work Schlabach has produced on 20th-century American Mennonites, this volume is very welcome. The thoroughly researched and detailed account brings significant contextualization to North American Mennonite thought, especially as it concerns nonviolence. Schlabach's book is not only grounded in exhaustive research into primary sources, it is also a straightforward, accessible history. The decades of Hershberger's life were crucial to the development of Mennonite identity in North America, and a central point to that process was the question of non-resistance. Yet it was about more than just pacifism; it was also about how to be a good American.

The book follows the life of Hersberger, but more than that it uses his life as a way into the decades surrounding the World Wars and Cold War of the 20th century, and the complex responses Mennonites made in that context. In particular, Schlabach's treatment of Hershberger's seminal study of Mennonite pacifism, *War, Peace and Nonresistance*, along with

the story behind it, is perceptive and gives the book its due for its vital place in modern American Mennonite thought. Schlabach's insight that Hershberger's biblical pacifism made more possible the outward expansion of pacifism to a "social and political witness" is significant (118).

Over the course of thirteen chapters divided into five parts, Schlabach presents Hershberger's life as a conduit to the larger issues of pacifism, acculturation, Mennonite-Christian ethics and the work of the church. Understanding the complexity of his subject's life and the wider world in which he lived, the author employs four themes: Hershberger's articulation of biblical pacifism, his ability to create and administer new churchly institutions, his persistence in biblical pacifism when it "chafed" under such influential critics as Reinhold Niebuhr, and his relationship to his critics. These organizing themes are compelling, as they emerge organically from Hershberger's life and are related to the world in which he operated.

Throughout the book Schlabach builds upon the four themes, thus making the volume more of an intellectual biography than one concerned with family background or childhood. Yet, despite a focus on Hershberger the adult, there are minutiae that could be pruned back, such as the discussion of course loads (40-41), when later life activities, such as Hershberger's work in California in the mid-1970s concerning migrant farm worker strikes, would be more useful for understanding the sweep and longevity of Hershberger's activities.

There are minor quibbles with this book, none of which is serious enough to dissuade a serious reader. At times it has too much backtracking in time. While the organization makes sense, to go back, often chapter after chapter, over the same several decades becomes somewhat repetitive. As well, an editorial-like voice occasionally appears in the text. At times the author seems to counsel Hershberger with "he should have's" (as on 101-102). At other times there is a subtle tendency to hagiography, for example, when summarizing the subject's young life as one of loyalty to Jesus Christ, the Mennonite Church, and the "mysterious" process by which he made decisions, in contrast to his brothers. In the chapter on Hershberger's response to Reinhold Niebuhr, this subtle cheerleading appears where Niebuhr is said to have "entirely missed the point" (344). To be fair, Schlabach does go to great lengths to show Hershberger as a real person, flawed though idealistic,

and highly sensitive to criticism though passionate.

These concerns aside, Schlabach has done an important service by placing Hershberger solidly in the story of 20th-century North American Mennonitism as it relates to church-state relations, institutional development, ethical debate, and pacifism. I recommend this volume to anyone interested in questions of North American Mennonites, intellectual biography, and the precarious balancing act of pacifism in a time of real – even necessary – military pressure in the world. This is a very impressive book about an impressive figure in American Mennonite history; in many ways this biography is a history of Mennonite Church thought in the 20th century.

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Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist, eds. *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009.

This collection of essays emerged from a conference at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre in 2007 where primarily, but not exclusively, younger Mennonite theologians gathered to discuss the receptivity of John Howard Yoder's work and explore what lines of development should be pursued. The collection includes ten essays, along with a foreword by Glenn Stassen and a preface by the editors. Each essay interrogates Yoder's work and allows Yoder to raise critical questions about a wide variety of matters of theological import. The breadth of Yoder's legacy is on display in the diversity of issues under consideration, which range from his biblical readings of war in the Old Testament to his approach to scholasticism and engineering. While nothing more binds the essays together than that each author deals with the receptivity of Yoder's work, this is sufficient for a lively, interesting volume that truly represents the state of Yoder scholarship today.

Chris Huebner begins the collection with a discussion on “what it might mean to inherit John Howard Yoder” (24), doing so through Yoder’s own wrestling with receptivity. Receptivity is not an end in itself but must have at its center “new modes of faithfulness and new examples of the truth of Christ” (26). This points the collection in an important direction, but what follows is somewhat confusing, albeit intriguing. For instance, the juxtaposition of Philip Stoltzfus and Andrew Brubaker-Kaethler’s essays in chapters two and three was a brilliant decision by the editors because these pieces seem to take Yoder’s inheritance in very different, if not opposite, directions.

Stoltzfus admonishes Anabaptist theology to consider Kant’s claim “*Sapere Aude!* [be bold to know...],” and get about correcting Yoder’s inattention to a “critical and constructive” doctrine of God more in tune with modern theologians such as Gordon Kaufmann and Sallie McFague. He wants to develop Yoder’s insistence that theology should always “start from scratch.” Brubaker-Kaethler finds Yoder too dismissive of scholasticism and the Middle Ages, and believes attention to that era can be beneficial to demonstrate Anabaptist theology’s deep roots in the tradition. These would appear to be different trajectories raising interesting questions of receptivity.

Branson Parler takes Yoder’s receptivity in yet a different direction, showing how the “neo-Calvinist tradition” could benefit from Yoder’s Christological reading of creation, whereas Yoder could benefit through more attention to the neo-Calvinist emphasis on the “*imago Dei*.” Parler gives one of the best accounts of how Yoder is for the nations, and yet sees a fuller task to which the Christian is called. He writes, “Yoder sees the Christian holding political office as analogous to the first violinist doing the job of the usher. . .” (75). That line alone is worth the cost of the book.

Then follow a series of essays engaging with particular theological issues that emerge from Yoder or should so emerge. Nekeisha Alexis-Baker brings womanist theology into conversation with his call for “revolutionary subordination.” She does not simply reject Yoder’s controversial claim but translates it into “creative transformation,” which is language Yoder also used. Richard Bourne’s discussion of Yoder, Foucault, and governmentality nicely follows her, for it offers a sympathetic critique of “revolutionary

subordination,” making sense of it through Yoder’s later “exilic ecclesiology.” This is the same ecclesiology that Paul Martens queries in a chapter on Yoder’s increasing use of Jeremiah in his later work.

Between Bourne and Martens, Paul Heidebrecht questions Yoder’s criticisms of “engineering,” showing how Yoder’s concern not to make history come out right through technique still has a place for the “engineer.” Andy Alexis-Baker sharply challenges appropriations of Yoder for “policing” and certain forms of “just peacemaking,” which he says do not “befit his legacy” (148). The final chapter by John Nugent picks up on a similar theme found in Martens and discusses Yoder’s use of Jewish history and its increasing transition to a Jeremianic vision, raising questions about “Yoder’s needlessly pejorative reading of palestinocentric existence, the city of Jerusalem and the return from exile” (174).

This book demonstrates that the charge that Anabaptists withdraw from society and/or are sectarian assumes more coherence among the Anabaptist witness than actually exists, but who should be surprised by that? Many of these theologians are as marked by their doctoral training and its concerns as they are by their Anabaptist ecclesial location. Moreover, many of the same disagreements besetting mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics are on display here. Nonetheless, these essays also demonstrate significant continuities, especially a preoccupation with how Scripture should be read in order “to own the Lamb’s victory in one’s own time,” as Huebner puts it. This is an important book by an important group of stellar theologians from whom we will hear more in future.

D. Stephen Long, Professor of Systematic Theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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The Conrad Grebel Review is an interdisciplinary journal of Christian inquiry devoted to thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective. Published three times a year, each issue usually contains refereed scholarly articles, responses to articles, informal reflections and essays, and book reviews. The Review occasionally publishes conference proceedings as well. Submissions are sought which, in subject and approach, will be accessible and of interest to specialists and general readers.

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Articles are original works of scholarship engaged in conversation with the relevant disciplinary literature, and written in a lively style appealing to the educated, non-specialist reader. Articles must be properly referenced, using endnotes, and should not exceed 7,500 words. The Review follows the Chicago Manual of Style.

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Reflections are thoughtful and/or provocative pieces that draw on an author's expertise and experience. These submissions may be homilies, speeches, or topical essays, for instance. Manuscripts should be about 3,000 words.

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