



# **The Conrad Grebel Review**

Volume 33, Number 3, Fall 2015

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**... and Book Reviews**



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# The Conrad Grebel Review

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*Cover photograph: A Canadian Mennonite conscientious objector reading in his bunk at Koksilah Alternative Service Work Camp (Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia) circa 1942-44. Credit: Wilson A. Hunsberger/Mennonite Archives of Ontario. This photograph and many others can be viewed online at [archives.mhsc.ca](http://archives.mhsc.ca).*

## Foreword

This issue offers a broad range of articles and book reviews, including several items that give us an opportunity to familiarize CGR readers with the work of distinguished Mennonite social historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz. He is the editor of *Mennonite Geschichtsblätter*, a German scholarly journal of Anabaptist history and Mennonite studies, and enjoys a deserved reputation as a resource for Mennonite self-understanding.

We take this occasion to express our deep gratitude to colleague Arthur P. Boers of Tyndale Seminary, CGR's indefatigable book review editor, for his dedicated service to the journal for more than a dozen years, and to announce that Troy Osborne, Assistant Professor of History and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, has stepped into that role. As well, we celebrate the many valuable contributions of Carol Lichti, CGR's longtime circulation manager, whose position will now be filled by Katie Gingerich. Thank you, Arthur and Carol! And welcome aboard, Troy and Katie!

*Jeremy M. Bergen*  
Editor

*Stephen A. Jones*  
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# The (Non)Violent Reign of God: Rethinking Christocentrism in Light of the Ascension

*Zacharie Klassen*

## Introduction

Increasingly commonplace in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology is the integration of a commitment to Christian nonviolence with a belief in the essentially nonviolent character of God. This integration is often performed to such an extent that to claim Christian nonviolence as integral to discipleship while neglecting the claim of God's nonviolence is to invalidate both claims. However, not everyone is convinced that one claim relies on the other for credibility.<sup>1</sup> The issues underlying this debate include the nature of Scripture and (or as) revelation, historical-critical approaches to the New Testament and their reconstructions of the man Jesus of Nazareth, and others. Most germane to the debate in the broader Anabaptist-Mennonite community of faith is the issue of what it means to read Scripture Christocentrically.

A generally accepted definition of a Christocentric hermeneutic is that it is a way of reading the whole of the Scriptures with the conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus definitively reveal not only God's intentions for humanity in the past, present, and future, but also God's true character. This hermeneutic presents a problem to Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians who wish to assert that God is nonviolent, since many characterizations of God in Scripture conflict with the depiction of a nonviolent Jesus. The solution most often taken is to claim that the 'nonviolent' Jesus trumps the 'violent' God. In this case, a characterization of God in the Scriptures has authority only inasmuch as it corresponds to the nonviolent life of Jesus as the definitive revelation of God and God's rule.<sup>2</sup> This is one way to apply the

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the current state of the debate, see the many responses to Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), found in *Direction* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 134-206. For an earlier summary of the debate, see Willard M. Swartley, "God's Moral Character as the Basis for Human Ethics," in *The Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 377-98.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 296-315.

general definition of Christocentric hermeneutics to a particular theological issue.

The primary assumption in this approach to a Christocentric reading of Scripture is that the NT witness to the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is, among other things, a revelation of his nonviolent divinity by virtue of his divinity's unity with his nonviolent humanity. In this essay I engage with J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent God* in order to challenge that assumption, which is employed throughout this book.<sup>3</sup> Weaver upholds the claim of God's nonviolence through appealing to the story of Jesus, which he interprets as a story of God's salvation "through the power of resurrection and the restoration of life."<sup>4</sup> I argue that naming God nonviolent on the basis of the story of Jesus is a mistake, because it fails to offer a robust enough account of that story.

The story or narrative of Jesus witnesses not only to the revelation of the nonviolent God-man but also to the revelation of the ascended man-God, whom the narrative declares reigns at the Father's right hand in a way or character of being not fully revealed to us. With the help of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder and Catholic theologian Douglas Farrow, I will show how the ascension, as a central apostolic witness to the revelation of God in the person of Jesus, is an essential narrative component to consider in discussions of Christocentric hermeneutics, a component largely ignored in Weaver's book. By broadening Christocentric hermeneutics through renewed attention to Jesus' bodily ascension, I contend that claims as to *God's* nonviolence are problematized, as the character and activity of the human Jesus is not fixed solely in his story during his time on earth. I will end the paper by arguing that Christian discipleship is nevertheless a call to nonviolent living, and offer a constructive proposal for a chastened Christocentric hermeneutics.

### **Weaver's Nonviolent God and the God of Jesus' Story**

In his most recent book, J. Denny Weaver appeals to a particular kind of

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Press, 2000), 74-75.

<sup>3</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Christocentric hermeneutic in order to argue for a “nonviolent God.”<sup>5</sup> He contends that “[i]f God is revealed in Jesus . . . then God should be considered nonviolent as a reflection of the nonviolence of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> While the Scriptures as a whole characterize God in both violent and nonviolent ways, and thus present the discerning reader with both an offence and an apparent contradiction, Jesus is the “arbiter”—the “reference point that can serve as judge”—adjudicating between conflicting images of the divine throughout the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Since the Bible “contains the origins of the people of God” but is not a “transcendent source of rules that dictate theology,” Christians today must seek to live from the source of their origins, and that source is Jesus, his particular life, and his living story.<sup>8</sup> Further, as Weaver has stated elsewhere, each generation must discern in its own way how Jesus alters their understanding of the relationship between God and the world, rather than relying on a single, unchanging, and authoritative Christian cosmology.<sup>9</sup> In effect, in *The Nonviolent God* Weaver attempts to show how Jesus challenges present-day cosmologies, Christian or otherwise, that rely on a deity who effects or sanctions violence in order to achieve divine or human ends.

For Weaver, the theological argument for God’s nonviolence is not intended as an abstract statement about God’s being and attributes. Indeed, he seeks to avoid abstract language when describing God as the one God who has become incarnate. When speaking of God’s character as nonviolent, he is not imagining nonviolence *in abstracto*. Rather, nonviolence names a concrete way of being in the world exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Lord. Since Christian theology is about this incarnate one and his particular human life, theological statements regarding Jesus’ character necessarily map directly onto his divine character. That is, arguing for a nonviolent God is arguing for nonviolent *human* living.<sup>10</sup>

Theology or, more to the point, Christology is not fundamentally a form of dogmatic reflection but a way of “living,” an ethics, and the Gospel is a “lived narrative,” not simply an account of what happened more than

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>9</sup> Weaver, “A Believers’ Church Christology,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (1983): 116.

<sup>10</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 3.



two thousand years ago summarized into creedal form and handed down as pure doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Because of this lived nature of theology, the image or characterization of God that one seeks to live *from* matters. Living from the images of a violent God necessarily empowers, or at the very least sanctions, human violence.<sup>12</sup> For Christians, the definitive image of God has been revealed in the person of Jesus, who “makes visible God’s reign on earth.”<sup>13</sup> For Weaver, Jesus makes it visible nonviolently.

While there is much to commend in Weaver’s approach, it must be closely questioned. And although a compelling case can be made, based on NT documents, that Jesus lived and taught in ways that could rightfully be described as nonviolent, it is not clear from these documents that it is appropriate to map Jesus’ nonviolent actions and teachings onto his humanity or his divinity as such. Rather, this is an interpretive theological and philosophical move that Weaver has to make with reference to the narrative and theological accounts of Jesus. Beyond just showing how, from the beginning until the present, Jesus’ life is characterized by nonviolence, he must also persuade readers as to why the language of nonviolence should be accepted as an essential characteristic of God without qualification. Adequately testing Weaver’s hermeneutical claim about God’s nonviolence thus requires evaluating the narrative of Jesus and the theological statements that Weaver employs.

First, we must ask critical questions about the scope of the narrative of Jesus that Weaver appeals to. Is his narrative Christocentric enough to make the case for a nonviolent God revealed in Jesus? Does this narrative incorporate *all* the significant components of the NT witness regarding Jesus in his divine-human person? If it can be shown that the narrative contains key elements that make ambiguous Jesus’ human identity as a nonviolent person, it would problematize Weaver’s account. Recently, W. Derek Suderman critiqued Weaver and others for failing to consider Jesus’ own use of scripture when making statements about God’s nonviolence.<sup>14</sup> Suderman

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 170-86.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>13</sup> J. Denny Weaver, “Narrative Theology in an Anabaptist-Mennonite Context,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12, no. 2 (March 1994): 172.

<sup>14</sup> W. Derek Suderman, “Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Nonviolent God,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter

observes that Jesus drew upon “the judgement motif” that undergirds the characterizations of God’s ‘violence’ that Weaver rejects.<sup>15</sup> Suderman’s point reminds readers of Jesus’ story to think more broadly about all that is entailed in reading scripture Christocentrically. Christocentric readings look not only at what Jesus did but also at what he said and, by consequence, at what he seemed to believe about God.<sup>16</sup>

With Suderman’s insight in mind, we can now consider another underappreciated aspect of the revelation of God in Jesus’ story as Weaver tells it: the ascension of that same man from Nazareth. What effect does paying concerted attention to the narrative feature of Jesus’ bodily ascension have on Christocentric hermeneutics? Before answering this question in relation to Weaver’s *Nonviolent God*, I should briefly discuss the ascension as it has been understood in various streams of Christian theology. While space does not permit a broad analysis of Christian thinking on this subject, I will examine two modern theologians’ accounts of it.<sup>17</sup>

In Mennonite theological discourse, we need not look far to discover significant engagement with the meaning of the ascension. Throughout his writings, John Howard Yoder drew attention to it, and *The Royal Priesthood* contains an essay on the significance of both the epiphany and the ascension for the discourse of theology.<sup>18</sup> In addition, key sections of *The Priestly Kingdom*,<sup>19</sup> *The Christian Witness to the State*,<sup>20</sup> and *The Politics*

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2014): 44-66.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> Weaver also states that God is revealed in the “teaching” of Jesus: Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 2. However, how far he gives a fair hearing to the teachings of judgment attributed to Jesus would be a subject for another paper.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of early Christian thinking on the ascension, see J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 140.

<sup>19</sup> See John Howard Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of the Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 46-62.

<sup>20</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 8-14.

of Jesus<sup>21</sup> include accounts of the meaning of the ascension for theology and discipleship.<sup>22</sup>

In the essay “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” Yoder states that to do theology “is to be careful about one’s words in the fear of God. To do moral theology doxologically is to watch our language in the light of YHWH’s mighty works.”<sup>23</sup> One of the “mighty works” he refers to is the ascension.<sup>24</sup> Yoder asserts that the ascension should cause us to be careful with our words, always discerning how appropriate they are for describing “the cosmos in terms dictated by the knowledge that a once slaughtered lamb is now living” (and, I might add, is ruling the world).<sup>25</sup> With Yoder I contend that discernment requires the inclusion of “multiple voices, contexts, and identities”<sup>26</sup> in order to prevent us from becoming careless with our language. If the form of Christocentric hermeneutics in contemporary and future Anabaptist-Mennonite discourse is to be broadened by paying special attention to the mighty work of the ascension, we do well to listen to those outside our circles who have thought long and hard about the significance of the ascension for theology and ecclesiology. With this in mind, I turn to the work of Catholic theologian Douglas Farrow.

### **The Ascension as the Open-Ended Narrative of Jesus**

In *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Farrow notes “how little mention the ascension gets these days.”<sup>27</sup> This lack of attention is partly due, he suggests, to a post-

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<sup>21</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 246-47.

<sup>22</sup> Much more could be said about how Yoder views the ascension, but that is beyond the scope of this article. Below, however, I do return briefly to Yoder’s engagement with the ascension in his *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 128, 132, 139.

<sup>26</sup> This phrase comes out of a call for papers for “Wading Deeper: Anabaptist Mennonites Engage Postmodernism,” the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre graduate conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, May 30-June 1, 2014. The present article was originally delivered there in similar form.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 9-10.

Copernican embarrassment with the image of the resurrected Jesus being transported above the clouds to, where, exactly?<sup>28</sup> The embarrassment is part and parcel of a larger embarrassment with Christ's bodily ascension in the history of Christian theology from early on. Farrow argues that forms of Gnosticism in the theology of Origen and Augustine, and later in the philosophy and theology of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel (among others), reflect this embarrassment with notable intensity.<sup>29</sup>

According to Farrow, Origen understood the ascension as an "ascension of the mind since only the mind is capable of participation in the Logos."<sup>30</sup> Augustine used the ascension to justify a near dissolution of the bodily, ascended Christ into the church, thereby downplaying Christ's ongoing humanity, eventually empowering a triumphalist church.<sup>31</sup> Kant interpreted the ascension as our common journey to moral purity.<sup>32</sup> Schleiermacher argued that Christ's humanity had to be left behind in order that "his invisible and spiritual work in human society might succeed."<sup>33</sup> And, finally, Hegel equated the ascension with the cross, making the end of Christ's life the ascension of the "World Spirit."<sup>34</sup> For Farrow, all these interpretations uphold an overly abstract, spiritualized interpretation of the ascension, consistently failing to grapple with an essential tension created by the attestation of Jesus' bodily ascension.<sup>35</sup>

Farrow describes this tension as "eucharistic ambiguity," by which he refers to the ecclesial experience of both the presence and the absence

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Widdicombe has critiqued Farrow's interpretations of the fathers, claiming that Farrow's reading of Origen and Augustine is simplistic or reductive, and does not account for their much more nuanced accounts of the ascension and the relation between God and creation. See Peter Widdicombe, "Ascension and Ecclesia and Reading the Fathers," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 58, no. 1 (2002): 165-76. A similar critique is offered by Robert Jensen in his review of *Ascension and Ecclesia* in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2001): 101-102.

<sup>30</sup> Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 121-29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 186-89.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 89-129, 168-91.

of Christ in our midst as we gather around the common table.<sup>36</sup> Jesus' ascension to heaven and the sending of the spirit is the act that founds the church, but the Holy Spirit sent at Pentecost "does not present himself but the *absent* Jesus."<sup>37</sup> "Ecclesial being" (Farrow's term) is thus constituted by its relationship to Jesus, who is both present and absent. Further, the absence of Christ represents the creation of a definite distinction between our history in the world and Jesus' ongoing history. "Jesus-history," as Farrow calls it, was once immediately present within our own history but is now hidden from our sight at the Father's right hand (Acts 1:9). "Jesus-history does not end with his ascension but only really begins there."<sup>38</sup> The human Jesus' life carries on.

The problem with gnostic interpretations of the ascension is that they draw the history of the human Jesus of Nazareth to a close, making the life, death, or even the resurrection the boundaries of that history: "[The] conflation of resurrection, ascension and heavenly session . . . shifts the focus away from what happens to and for Jesus, in his own humanity, to the question of his revelation to us."<sup>39</sup> Farrow's *Ascension and Ecclesia* thus takes seriously the ascension by paying special attention to the ongoing existence of the humanity of the ascended one, and all the implications it might have for the church.<sup>40</sup>

Renewed attention to Jesus' bodily ascension, such as is evident in Farrow's work, should sound attractive to Anabaptist-Mennonite ears for a number of reasons. For instance, much of the theology we are used to would reject, whether intentionally or not, the gnostic tendencies taken to task by Farrow. Against Origen, or rather a gnostic representation of Origen, Anabaptist-Mennonites see the divine-human Jesus as someone to follow in real, practical, earthly ways and not just as the way to transcend the mundanities of existence. Our bodies are not to be transcended but conformed to the human pattern of Christ's earthly life. Consequently, and against Augustine, we cannot conform our bodies to patterns of engagement

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 257, 266, 271n59; emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 13.

in the world that are triumphalist; the church in the world is supposed to be a separate and suffering church, not a “successful” church. Perhaps, like Kant, Anabaptist-Mennonites have traditionally valued moral purity, but they would not have seen such a goal possible apart from a real union between the believer and Christ in the church, experienced through rebirth and sealed in baptism. Against Schleiermacher, an early focus on the return of Christ and an ongoing emphasis on a distinction between the church and the world meant, for Anabaptists, denying that society was progressing into a utopia of God-consciousness. And against Hegel, the resurrection and ascension, for Anabaptists, were more than the emergence of a universal *Geist* and were rather the foundation for creating a community that anticipated the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.

Acknowledging that Farrow’s critique of gnostic tendencies in the Christian tradition resonates with some traditional Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives, there is good reason for contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians to exercise a similar focus on Christ’s bodily ascension. Indeed, if the narrative of Jesus, his real, particular humanity, is the center from which we learn about the character of God’s rule and our place as disciples under it, shouldn’t we expect our theological discourse to take stock of the bodily ascension, with all the effects it may have on our theology and ecclesiology?

As noted above, John Howard Yoder is one who has paid attention to the significance of the ascension. In one of his substantial engagements with the subject, Yoder outlines its ecclesial implications and offers important suggestions about the form of Christ’s lordship.<sup>41</sup> He points to Matthew 28, where Jesus declares that he has been given authority over heaven and earth. Following this declaration, Jesus calls his disciples to baptize, teach, and make disciples. The command reveals the way his authority is to be manifest in our history in the church. The “meaning and content of his kingship” resides in the fact that time has not stopped, and that an ecclesial task or, using Farrow’s term, an “ecclesial being” is given to the church under the authority of the exalted Christ.<sup>42</sup> Understanding the significance of Christ’s ascension is thus, at least in part, simultaneously a discovery of the church’s identity and mission.

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<sup>41</sup> Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 248-49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

This is not all that Yoder has to say about the ascended Christ. He also suggests that the ascended Christ rules over history in a two-fold form of activity. On the one hand, Christ rules “in a visible way through the servant church” characterized by, among other things, its nonviolence.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, he rules “in a hidden way through the powers.”<sup>44</sup> What does Yoder mean? Elsewhere, he talks about how “characteristic of the reign of Christ is that evil . . . is channelized by God, in spite of itself, to serve God’s purposes.”<sup>45</sup> While this way of putting the matter does not, strictly speaking, characterize Christ’s reign in terms of violence, neither does it characterize that reign as nonviolent, with its co-option of evil powers for divine purposes. Ray Gingerich is thus partially correct in making a similar point about Yoder’s interpretation of the “usefulness” of violence under the sovereignty of God.<sup>46</sup> Gingerich states that “for Yoder, God may do and does do morally what neither Jesus nor his followers are morally allowed to do.”<sup>47</sup> I say that Gingerich is partially correct because, as I will show below, in light of the ascension what Jesus is “morally allowed to do” as the one sitting at God’s right hand is an open question.

More recently, Philip E. Stoltzfus has taken up a similar line of questioning.<sup>48</sup> In response to Gingerich, he helpfully frames Yoder’s use of the Old Testament by pointing out that Yoder’s appeal to the biblical language of vengeance should be interpreted as an attempt to “decenter the ethical dualisms of his interlocutors.”<sup>49</sup> Stoltzfus also points out the dialogical nature of the texts that warrant readings which question God’s violence. However, he must be challenged on his assumption that the most effective, courageous forms of theological “suspicion” are those marshaled against readings that

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Ray Gingerich, “Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Nonviolence: Was Yoder’s God a Warrior?” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (2003): 433.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>48</sup> Philip E. Stoltzfus, “Nonviolent Jesus, Violent God? A Critique of John Howard Yoder’s Approach to Theological Construction,” in *Powers and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009): 29-46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 33.



retain a “concept of God” which includes vengeance, as Yoder’s does.<sup>50</sup> Might not Yoder’s attempt to decenter ethical dualisms—by retaining the language of vengeance and wrath—be a more authentic form of theological suspicion than constructing from dialogical texts a monological language of God as nonviolent?

Indeed, the consequence of Yoder’s description of Christ’s ascended activity as manifested in a partially hidden, two-fold form is that the dialogical nature of scripture is retained rather than resolved through an overt form of theological construction. Stoltzfus states that in Yoder’s writings, “the reader cannot tell” which image of God Yoder is going to stand on but “*should* be able to tell.”<sup>51</sup> But Yoder’s commitment to the dialogical nature of the scriptures explains why the reader cannot and should not be able to tell. For it is through this dialogical nature that affirming the distinction between creator and creature is retained. In light of this distinction it can still be said that the creator has drawn near to us, becoming a creature in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and that through this event God has definitively revealed God’s purposes to humankind. What must not be said is that the definitive revelation of God in the man Jesus Christ overcomes the distinction between creator and creature. By virtue of Christ’s humanity, the church has been given a “*share in his kingship*,” but only a share.<sup>52</sup>

To have a share in Jesus’ kingship is thus to reject the notion of a total correspondence between divine and creaturely activity on the one hand, or a total human knowledge as to the moral character of divine activity on the other. The scriptures as a whole and Jesus’ narrative in particular never allow such a move. Yoder’s reading of Jesus’ narrative seems to suggest there is still a dimension to Christ’s reign that is “hidden,” and while Christ has given clear commands to the church and even given it a particular form of existence corresponding to his own earthly history, the still embodied Jesus Christ now inhabits a history and is engaged in activities not given to the church to see. In seeking her own ecclesial tasks, the church need not agonize over the Christ-history that has diverged from her own, because she has been given her marching orders from the Lord. That such a divergence

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38; emphasis in original.

<sup>52</sup> Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 248; emphasis in original.

has taken place should produce humility within ecclesial-being with respect to the church's relationship to, and words about, the Lord.

Yoder's account helpfully spells out the ecclesial implications of the ascension. Christ's ascension, exaltation, and endowment with authority reveal the church's role to be that of proclaiming the Gospel through service in the duration between Christ's leaving and return. Only briefly alluded to in Yoder, however, is a substantial recognition of "what happens to and for Jesus, in his own humanity" as a result of the ascension. The significance of Christ's "hidden" activity is left largely unexplored. In one sense this is appropriate, since to speak too readily about this hidden dimension is to claim such history as totally revealed and thus to resolve the still dialogical, open-ended character of the New Testament.<sup>53</sup> In another sense, deeper reflection on Christ's hidden activity, especially as Farrow has offered, may be equally important in providing the humility necessary to "be careful about one's words in the fear of God."

### **Re-thinking God's (Non)violence in Light of the Ascension**

Returning to Weaver's *The Nonviolent God*, what becomes striking is its lack of explicit engagement with the significance for the church of Jesus' bodily ascension. This is odd, since Weaver consistently appeals to phrases like "the reign of God" or "the victory of the reign of God" throughout the book. Most telling is that these phrases are effectively shorthand for what God has accomplished in Jesus' resurrection. For Weaver, the reality and character of God's rule and God's salvation in Jesus are definitively disclosed there:<sup>54</sup> "It is because of the resurrection that Christians proclaim Jesus as Lord and claim immediate access to Jesus today."<sup>55</sup> The resurrection is the guarantee that Jesus' nonviolent life definitively characterizes God's reign.

Two dimensions to Weaver's statement deserve questioning. First, while without resurrection Jesus would not be declared Lord, doesn't the narrative of Jesus demonstrate that he is proclaimed as Lord not principally because of his resurrection but because he was witnessed ascending to the Father? Contrary to Weaver's claim that the resurrection and appearances

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<sup>53</sup> It is exactly such a tendency that is argued against here.

<sup>54</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 43, 160.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

to witnesses are the climax or culmination of the narrative, the sermon in Acts that he refers to lists the exaltation to the right hand of God as the culminating point of God's victory (Acts 2:33).<sup>56</sup> If the climax of God's salvation and rule is to be drawn from the narrative of Jesus, his death and resurrection are not the climax. They are undoubtedly central, but they are not the complete picture.

Second, Weaver states that we can claim "immediate access to Jesus today." What is "immediate access"? Consider Weaver's strong focus on narrative or story as the foundation of Christian identification with Jesus. In a sense, an appeal to narrative is justified, as the narrative is a witness and invitation to life under God's reign. However, with his stress on the resurrection as the culmination of the narrative of Jesus, Weaver makes the resurrection the definitive word of that invitation. Yet that definitive word comes with the declaration of Jesus' exaltation and the statement about his place in heaven (Acts 2:33-36, 3:21). When the Holy Spirit comes, we are invited to live under the reign not only of the crucified, risen one but of the exalted one. Farrow says as much, stating that the Holy Spirit presents to us "the absent Jesus."<sup>57</sup> To say it is because of Jesus' resurrection that he can be "immediately accessible" to us, as Weaver does, begs the question as to Jesus' location, post-resurrection and ascension. Without carefully exploring Jesus' bodily ascension, Weaver leaves open the possibility of a Hegelian interpretation of the ascension. In turn, it becomes a real temptation to think of Christ's ascension and reign as something that happens solely on account of human participation in Jesus' narrative.<sup>58</sup>

Taken to its logical conclusion, a Hegelian interpretation allows the Christian to become "an extension of the incarnation" and to share in Christ's reign with a degree of equivalence inappropriate in light of Christ's exalted status.<sup>59</sup> This in turn produces the effect of displacing the body of Christ. In Weaver's view of an "extension of the incarnation," is there any room for "eucharistic ambiguity" in the church? Is there any recognition

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 257, 266, 271n59.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>59</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 171.

of the “continuing incarnation” of the absent Lord?<sup>60</sup> Farrow worries that by ignoring the absence of Jesus the church will misconstrue the presence, and when this occurs “the problem of the church’s own identity is badly compounded; for it is no longer clear who it is that it confesses as Lord.”<sup>61</sup> The next step, he notes, “is almost always to fix even more strongly on one or another aspect of its own structure or mission as a guarantee of its fidelity and continued relevance.”<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, might God’s “nonviolence” be just such an aspect, a guarantee of the relevance of Christianity? Jesus Christ, the nonviolent, social activist God, seems much more relevant to the modern mind than Jesus the ascended, exalted Jew.<sup>63</sup> What may be most scandalous here for Weaver is that Jesus “in his human particularity” is exalted.<sup>64</sup> The scandal of the God-man’s exaltation is that it is proclaimed in language decidedly ontological, and it is precisely Jesus’ “ontological deity” that Weaver finds unhelpful for “discovering and discerning Jesus in his human particularity.”<sup>65</sup> Exaltation is further problematic because it simultaneously joins and severs human history and divine history, human action and divine action. This question must be therefore be put to Weaver: Is Jesus Christ immediately accessible to us today but not also inaccessible?

Though Weaver states otherwise at one point,<sup>66</sup> he gives the impression that Jesus’ narrative and the people in whom it is incarnated become the primary *topos* of Christ, the one place where Jesus is truly and always accessible (present) and active. Indeed, where the story of God’s rule in history had an “evolutionary trajectory,” it is “reached with Jesus.”<sup>67</sup> But where is the incarnate Jesus now? If Jesus-history has diverged from ours in an important way, is it ever appropriate to speak of God’s rule being reached at any point before Jesus’ history and ours become one again? Isn’t God’s

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<sup>60</sup> The phrase “continuing incarnation” appears in the subtitle to Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ’s Continuing Incarnation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>61</sup> Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 272.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Weaver, “A Believers’ Church Christology,” 114.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

rule still active in its own way, through the human Jesus' place beside the Father? Where Yoder was willing to intimate that the ascended Christ reigns in a way "hidden" and inaccessible from our absolute judgments, and that Christ's kingship is not totally equivalent to human participation in his death and resurrection, Weaver tends to equate Christ's kingship with any activity, within the church or otherwise, that corresponds to the rule of God as absolutely visible in the story of Jesus.<sup>68</sup> This produces a number of key tensions in Weaver's hermeneutical model that I will now address in light of Farrow's analysis.

First, in spite of his emphasis on lived theology, Weaver ultimately appears to give into some gnostic tendencies. He does so by conflating the ascension with the resurrection in articulating his version of a "narrative Christus victor," with the result that whatever it means for Jesus to have ascended, his bodily ascension, his ongoing history as the man from Nazareth, is no longer considered a factor in the lived narrative of Jesus and hence in any understanding of how God and God's rule might be characterized. For Weaver, it is the visibility of God's reign in Jesus that funds his account of the nonviolent God. Missing is the invisibility of God's reign in Jesus witnessed to in the ascension. By undervaluing this aspect of that reign, Weaver's Christocentrism is too narrow.

Perhaps the greater danger in Weaver's approach can be articulated by comparison with Rudolf Bultmann's famous mythological reading of the resurrection: "Christ the crucified and risen one encounters us in the word of proclamation and nowhere else. And faith in *this word* is the true faith of easter."<sup>69</sup> That is, based on Weaver's account we might paraphrase Bultmann to say: "Christ the crucified and risen one rules through his narrative, lived through an extension of the incarnation and nowhere else. And faith in this narrative is the true faith of easter." Given Weaver's understanding of the narrative of Jesus, is it the narrative itself that functions as God's reign, or is it the God-man Jesus who reigns at the Father's right hand that is God's reign?

Weaver may respond that his account takes full stock of Jesus Christ reigning at the Father's right hand. But can he affirm that the man

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<sup>68</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 186.

<sup>69</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984), 39; emphasis added.

Jesus of Nazareth has an ongoing history at the Father's side that prevents theologians and Christians generally from making authoritative statements about his total character (the way Weaver has done, in arguing for God's nonviolence)? Based on the following quotation from Weaver that alludes to Jesus' nonviolent life, the answer must be No:

If Jesus is "one in being" with God or "equally God" or "equal to the Father in respect of his divinity," these statements would certainly seem to support belief in a nonviolent God. Traditionalists who would preserve a prerogative of violence for God are put in the position of arguing for an interpretation of this language that applies Jesus' equality with God only to the incarnation and not to God in other settings and persons of the Trinity. Stated differently, they argue that there are attributes in the person of God that are not in the person of Jesus.<sup>70</sup>

However, if Jesus' incarnation, the scope of his actual narrative, encompasses and involves more than we can rightly say because of his bodily ascension—his ongoing life in the flesh—then the arguments of the "traditionalists" do not lack support. Put differently, they argue not that "there are attributes in the person of God that are not in the person of Jesus" but that there are attributes in the person of Jesus not fully revealed to us. Weaver concedes that we cannot know everything about God because God is infinite, but clearly he believes that we can know everything there is to know about the character of the man Jesus.<sup>71</sup> This seems implied in asserting God's nonviolence based on Jesus' nonviolent earthly life. The ascension, as the continuation of the incarnation in heaven, problematizes the belief that we know everything about the character of Jesus, including whether his role at God's right hand can be characterized as violent or nonviolent. Jesus' uniquely exalted person, his infinite humanity, cannot be so reduced.

Weaver's argument rests upon a critical assumption that must be challenged, namely that the revelatory character of the narrative of Jesus effectively ends at the resurrection, which for Weaver is the "ultimate

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<sup>70</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 160-61.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

testimony” of God’s reign.<sup>72</sup> Written out of this assumption is a recognition that a divine-human history continues meaningfully in the Godhead by virtue of the ascension. If this recognition is allowed, the possibility must be granted that the lived life of Jesus as Son of Man sitting at the Father’s right hand is ongoing, and that it is beyond our grasp and definitive judgment. God’s revelation to humanity in the divine-human person of Jesus is no less definitive, since God has identified with this one in our history, but this revelation is not total with respect to our knowledge of his character and activity. His humanity has also been exalted and now exercises a unique, hidden role at God’s right hand. That is, Christ has revealed God’s fullness but this fullness expresses, through the ascension, divine hiddenness as well. Revelation does not overcome this hiddenness but exposes its infinite depths. For Weaver, Christ’s death and resurrection seal the meaning of Christ’s character (posited in terms of nonviolence), whereas for Farrow it is Christ’s ongoing life that has its own particular character—and this makes Weaver’s position problematic.<sup>73</sup>

### **Constructive Proposal for Chastened Christocentric Hermeneutics**

My argument has sought to demonstrate that any appeal to Christocentric hermeneutics on the basis of the narrative of Jesus must be chastened by the limit point in its own narrative base, and that this limit point is the moment where the man Jesus of Nazareth is “hid from our sight” (Acts 1:9). Using Christocentric hermeneutics to make claims about God’s essential character is problematized on the basis of the hermeneutics itself, because Christ’s narrative includes a hidden form of embodiment. In this light, we may question whether Christian nonviolence itself is normative to discipleship. After all, if the embodied, human-divine Jesus of Nazareth is involved in forms of activity that we can no longer see and make absolute ethical observations about, it might follow that Christian ethics and discipleship, based on Jesus’ embodied life, is relativized or at least left ambiguous.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>73</sup> For Farrow, the significance of the ascension is in its demonstrating Christ’s ongoing life. Commenting on a statement from Hans Frei, Farrow notes that Jesus’ history “is not reduced now to the history of faith” (*Ascension and Ecclesia*, 237). It is this reduction that is worrisome in Weaver’s narrative of Jesus, even if Weaver understands this narrative to be “living.”



However, the above response relies upon a theological and anthropological assumption that must be simultaneously affirmed and challenged in light of our analysis so far, namely that God's character as revealed in Jesus Christ is a character that we can be empowered to grow in likeness to. There is an obvious truth to this assumption that is rooted in the New Testament (Romans 13:14 and Ephesians 5:1 are two examples). In the NT there is also a strong sense in which imitating Christ is not only imitating his earthly form but also participating or partaking in God's inner life or divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). If Christians are called to imitate Christ's nonviolent earthly life and partake of the divine nature, but the divine-human Christ is now also involved in activity that could be construed as violent, isn't this a contradiction? Must a choice not be made between a violent God and hence a Christian ethic that has space for violence, or a nonviolent God and hence a Christian ethic that refuses violence?

The proposal that I am presenting now is that, in light of the ascension, there is a third way of proceeding. Jesus Christ's earthly life, death, resurrection, and ascension demonstrate that the church, as a fundamental responsibility, must participate in the reign of God nonviolently, based on the example and commands Christ has set for her. Out of his earthly life, the church has been born, has taken shape, and is called upon to participate in Christ's kingship in the way appropriate to the "ecclesial-being" he has given her as the one with authority over heaven and earth. Imitating Christ and living under his lordship is possible because of the ascension that results in sending the Holy Spirit with power (Acts 1:8). However, what the ascension does not result in is a conflation of our share in his kingly authority with his kingship as such. As the ascended and glorified one, Christ is the singular human person for whom it is true that he is divine Lord and human agent without contradiction. Christians cannot say the same thing of themselves, and thus they cannot imitate Christ or assume a total moral equivalence with him.

This is not to say there is no relation, or only a minor relation, between the church and the ascended Christ. Far from it. Christian theology has from the earliest times recognized an intimate relation between the church and Christ post-ascension. Indeed, the author of Ephesians goes so far as to say that God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places

in Christ Jesus” (2:6). That Christians occupy a seat “with him” through the power of the Holy Spirit does not mean they exclusively occupy his seat at God’s right hand or that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to them. Those who follow Jesus are, mysteriously, to be “his body,” but the body is never to presume to be “the head” (Colossians 1:18). God is God, and we are not, regardless of the fact that God is also now and forevermore *incarnatus*.

The lived theology of Jesus of Nazareth is thus simultaneously something his disciples can imitate and something they simply cannot attain. They can imitate Jesus’ life because he is truly human; they cannot imitate Jesus because he is fully God. His humanity must never be thought to exhaust his divinity, even as his humanity expresses his divinity, in time and post-ascension, in eternity, without contradiction. While it may be legitimate on the basis of the incarnation to state that God acts or has acted nonviolently in history, it is not legitimate on the basis of the continued incarnation in heaven to use this statement to exclude the biblical language of God’s wrath or vengeance in order to say that God is nonviolent. Christology and Christocentric hermeneutics need not require a binary choice between a violent or nonviolent God. The better option, as Willard Swartley has contended, is to reject this “misconceived duality” in the first place.<sup>74</sup>

In light of the ascension, which as Yoder argued is the foundation for a proper distinction between Christ’s rule and our share in it, we have biblical and conceptual tools to reject the duality of violence and nonviolence in discussions of God’s character. With these same tools we can still affirm the requirement of nonviolence for disciples of Jesus. In this way, the final chapters in Weaver’s *The Nonviolent God* dealing with the importance of the practice of forgiveness for restorative justice, or the call to cross racial and ethnic boundaries in pursuit of reconciliation, are important and helpful. Scripture demonstrates that these activities are part of our share in Christ’s rule. But as we have seen, a defense of a nonviolent God is not clearly necessary to empower the lived theology appropriate for disciples who take seriously Jesus’ earthly example and commandments.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 396.

<sup>75</sup> See Weaver, *Nonviolent God: “Atonement, Violence, and Forgiveness,”* 201-22, and “Race, Gender, Money,” 223-53.

The church's language about the ascended and glorified one must therefore be tempered and nuanced, not with respect to what Jesus has commanded in his call for us to be people of peace, but with respect to the claim that if God is to be one with Jesus, God must be essentially nonviolent. Developing Anabaptist-Mennonite theology in the setting of Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand will make it less necessary to argue for a hermeneutic of God's nonviolence. Indeed, the latter may be seeking too much control of the scriptures within which we find God's living story—that is, asking for a resurrection without bodily ascension, a presence without absence, and a revealedness without hiddenness—that we must not ask for in light of the risen, ascended man from Nazareth.

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## Is God a Pacifist? The A. James Reimer and J. Denny Weaver Debate in Contemporary Mennonite Peace Theology

Susanne Guenther Loewen

God's means of achieving the ultimate reconciliation of all things are not immediately evident to us. God cannot be subjected to our interpretation of the non-violent way of Jesus. Our commitment to the way of the cross (reconciliation) is not premised on God's pacifism or non-pacifism. It is precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.—A. James Reimer<sup>1</sup>

[O]ne of the longest-running distortions in Christian theology has been the attribution of violence and violent intent to the will and activity of God. But if God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus rejected violence, as is almost universally believed, then the God revealed in Jesus Christ should be pictured in nonviolent images. If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.—J. Denny Weaver<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s a somewhat heated debate erupted on the pages of *The Conrad Grebel Review* between Canadian Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer and his American colleague J. Denny Weaver. Reimer accused Weaver of “ethical reductionism,” while Weaver accused Reimer of “buying into a mainstream Constantinian theology which spells the end of the Mennonite peace witness.” At one point Weaver suggested that the two of them co-

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<sup>1</sup> A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 492.

<sup>2</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 5.

author a book outlining their opposing visions for the future of Mennonite peace theology; they could entitle it *Mennonite Theology at the Crossroads*. But Reimer disagreed with Weaver's notion that the two of them in fact held radically opposing viewpoints. With the two theologians unable to agree even on the nature of their disagreement, the project was abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

Given that Mennonite scholars have ventured out of the realm of biblical theology and ethics and into systematic theology only within the past several decades,<sup>4</sup> the deep-seated nature of the disagreement between Reimer and Weaver is perhaps understandable. This is new territory for Mennonites, after all. Among other things, this significant shift has brought with it a novel set of questions regarding the implications of nonviolent ethics for understanding how God acts in human history. The resultant ongoing debate among Mennonite scholars can be summed up in the provocative question "Is God a pacifist?," which garners a variety of responses, some negative and others affirmative.<sup>5</sup> Within these larger debates, Reimer and Weaver represent two major perspectives. Following feminist and womanist theologians who view God as nonviolent, Weaver stresses the biblical narratives of Jesus, on the Yoderian grounds that the creeds of the "Constantinian" era (the formulations of Nicaea-Chalcedon) distorted Christian self-understanding through erasing the nonviolent, ethical dimension of faith in order to accommodate the violence of Christendom.<sup>6</sup> Contrastingly, Reimer views the "classical theological orthodoxy" of the

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<sup>3</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 247-48. The two theologians expound upon these accusations as they address one another in their subsequent work, whether explicitly or implicitly.

<sup>4</sup> J. Denny Weaver, "The General versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th-Century Mennonite Theologizing," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 28-29. See also J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000), 17.

<sup>5</sup> See proceedings from the Mennonite symposium, "Is God Nonviolent?," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 1-55; proceedings from a forum responding to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1-49; and proceedings from the Mennonite symposium on "Judgment and the Wrath of God" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 44-101.

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, "General versus the Particular," 45-46; J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 208, 194, 204; and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 11.

creeds as the crucial foundation for a nonviolent ethic, as they ensure that no human political or ethical system is absolutized, including nonviolence. “God is no Mennonite pacifist,” he asserts.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows I will contend that although Weaver’s nonviolent understanding of God and redemption begins the move toward a more consistently nonviolent peace ethic, Reimer’s critique provides important correctives concerning divine otherness and the limits of human nonviolence. From my feminist-Mennonite perspective, however, Weaver’s recognition of God’s nonviolence, as revealed in Jesus Christ, does not impinge upon divine “otherness” as Reimer and others fear, but redefines and radicalizes it as paradoxically particular, immanent, and participatory. It is not peace but the cycles of violence and retribution that constrain God and human ethics, the latter being images, albeit imperfect ones, of God’s peaceable character and action in human history. I will first outline the different theological contexts and conversations into which Reimer and Weaver speak and then focus on their debate surrounding the Trinity, particularly within the atonement, and the relationship between Christian nonviolent ethics and the work of God in history.

### **Which Root of the Matter? On Contexts and Starting Points**

Recognizing that Mennonites variously self-identify as “both Catholic and Protestant” and “neither Catholic nor Protestant,”<sup>8</sup> alongside Weaver’s observation that only fairly recently have Mennonites “started to become comfortable talking about theology as theology,” it is not surprising that identifying a starting point for Mennonite systematic theological reflection is less than straightforward. It is not clear where Mennonite theology fits within this larger Christian conversation. This explains in part why Weaver and Reimer enter it at such different places.

In Weaver’s view most 20th-century Mennonite theology has rested on the assumption that Mennonites accepted a universal “theology-in-general or Christianity-as-such,” composed of orthodox doctrines/

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<sup>7</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 247-48, 492.

<sup>8</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 27. According to Reimer, Weaver sees Mennonites as neither Catholic nor Protestant. See Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 256.

definitions of the Trinity and Christology and substitutionary interpretations of the atonement, and simply augmented this “core” with their distinctive emphases on nonviolent ethics and discipleship.<sup>9</sup> However, Weaver reverses this approach, beginning instead with the distinctives of Mennonite peace theology. He suggests that for Mennonites, Jesus’ nonviolence is a key part of the core; it is not necessary for Mennonite theology to assert its “validity” on the basis of the priorities of other, majority Christian traditions which sideline peace from the start.

Resisting the urge to defer to the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which he views as ethically vacuous, Weaver turns to the New Testament narratives as a more truly ecumenical starting point, and one that lends specific content to Jesus’ life and ministry and thereby illustrates the particularity of God’s (nonviolent) character. In this way Weaver safeguards the distinctive contribution that Mennonite theology makes to wider Christianity, arguing that it can take its place among other Christian theologies because they too are particular, distinctive, or contextual.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, he turns to a rereading of Christian history that maintains an ethic of peace or nonviolence as the ultimate measure of the faithfulness of the church; hence his siding with John Howard Yoder’s negative evaluation of the church of Christendom or of the Constantinian era, his view that the creeds are irreparably tainted by the alliance of church and empire at the time of their formulation, and his disapproval of attempts to “salvage Christendom’s violence-accommodating theology.”<sup>11</sup>

For Weaver, the presumably orthodox creeds are contextual and therefore contestable on the grounds of a nonviolent ethic. His emphasis both is influenced by, and influences, his engagement with other contextual theologies critical of violence—namely feminist, womanist, and black liberation theologies.<sup>12</sup> He engages “cutting edge” contextual

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<sup>9</sup> Weaver, “General versus the Particular,” 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 43-44; Weaver, “Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology,” 191, 207-209, and Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 3-7, 113-18.

<sup>11</sup> Weaver, “General versus the Particular,” 45, and Weaver, “Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology,” 208.

<sup>12</sup> Malinda E. Berry calls these “other voices on the peripheries of theology in general” or other “marginal voices.” See Berry, “Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny*



(or liberative) theologians such as Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, Delores Williams, and James Cone, taking into account their attention to systemic forms of violence such as sexism, racism, and classism. He uses these contextual theologies as resources for a more thoroughly nonviolent Mennonite theology, with a particular focus on Christology, atonement or soteriology, and a theology (proper) of God as nonviolent.<sup>13</sup>

Despite drawing deeply from Yoder's notion of the "Constantinian shift" as well as building on Yoder's Christology, Weaver admits that in using nonviolence to critique traditional atonement theories and orthodox, creedal theology, he has "chosen to engage in a theological task eschewed by Yoder."<sup>14</sup> Following black, feminist, and womanist theologians, Weaver ventures into novel theological territory, radically reframing Christology and letting go of what is harmful in the Christian tradition, while appealing to the Bible, Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, and Girardian thinkers as resources for nonviolent reflection and ethics, including his own nonviolent reinterpretation of the atonement, termed "narrative Christus Victor."<sup>15</sup>

Reimer's view sharply contrasts with Weaver's in evaluating the significance of the doctrines and creedal statements of Nicaea-Chalcedon. Though Reimer agrees with Weaver on their lack of ethical content, he nevertheless sees them as necessary, faithful distillations of the diversity of biblical concepts of and assertions about God, and therefore as foundational for Mennonite nonviolence.<sup>16</sup> Reading the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition

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Weaver, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 263.

<sup>13</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 1, 5-7, 323. Weaver prioritizes Mennonite distinctiveness even in relation to feminist, womanist, and black theologies, using them as resources but not creating a theological hybrid.

<sup>14</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 7, 161-78, and Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 4, 221 n3. See also Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 24. Despite being attuned to feminist/womanist concerns, Weaver does not apply these critiques to Yoder or even mention the difficulties raised by Yoder's abusive behavior toward women.

<sup>15</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 125, 287-88, 1-2, 320; Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," 204; and J. Denny Weaver, "Response to Reflections on *The Nonviolent Atonement*," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 48. Some of his key influences are Yoder, Harold S. Bender, René Girard, and Walter Wink.

<sup>16</sup> Weaver, "General versus the Particular," 40-41; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 261, 269. In Weaver's terms, Reimer "contends that the trinitarian orthodoxy of Nicaea is

as a theologically orthodox, trinitarian tradition with a distinctively “heightened ethical fidelity to the Jesus narrative,” the starting point for Reimer is “classical theological orthodoxy” as the “metaphysical-theological” foundation for a Mennonite peace ethic. “It is the Christian doctrine of God that is the foundation for good ethics,” says Reimer, “not good ethics which is the norm for our view of God.”<sup>17</sup> He argues that to begin with nonviolence, as Weaver does, is to buy into the “human history-making arrogance” of modern liberalism, to project one’s own (human or, in the case of Mennonites, “ethnic”) ideology onto God instead of viewing God as beyond every ideology.

Reimer contends that what is needed is a radically transcendent, orthodox understanding of God—which he finds especially in the tradition of apophatic or negative theology (“God as *limit*, as *unmasker*, as absolute *boundary*, as standing *over-against* the ideologies of any given age”).<sup>18</sup> Underlying Reimer’s claim is his disagreement with Weaver’s and Yoder’s characterization of all Constantinian-era theology as irretrievably tainted by violence. Trinitarian orthodoxy “cannot be equated with Constantinianism, but is in fact the best theological defence against all Constantinian-type political theologies (whether of the left, right, or centre).”<sup>19</sup> Reimer notes also that Weaver, more than Yoder, overlooks the fact that Arianism was “much more congenial to Constantinianism than orthodoxy,” meaning that its defeat actually served to rein in more extreme Constantinian impulses. Thus, Reimer “cannot dismiss the working of the divine in the movements of history even in its most unlikely places and persons (like Constantine).”<sup>20</sup>

Reimer’s suspicion about the assumptions of modern liberalism is greatly influenced by both Canadian philosopher George Grant (1918-88) and Stanley Hauerwas. Part of Reimer’s project is to caution Mennonites against capitulating too easily to modern liberal notions of “anti-sacramentalism,” voluntarism, and historicism, which he claims are both inconsistent with early Anabaptism and have led to contemporary atrocities such as nuclear

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necessary to anchor ‘the moral claims of Jesus’ in the ‘very nature and person of God.’”

<sup>17</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 248-49, 261.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 30, 32, 34; emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 248-49. See also A. James Reimer, “The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 53.

<sup>20</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 270, 295.

war and the decimation of the environment.<sup>21</sup> On these grounds Reimer, a “self-critical Mennonite,” turns to classical orthodoxy or to a Barthian, neo-orthodox sense of God as radically transcendent or wholly ‘other,’ which he sees as the surest way to avoid absolutizing any human political or ethical system (a move amounting, in his view, to a heretical narrowing of God’s trinitarian person, historical action, and allegiances).<sup>22</sup> Despite not identifying as Yoderian—Yoder once accused him of “trying to Catholicize the Mennonites”—Reimer nevertheless claims to be fleshing out certain neglected trajectories in Yoder’s and early Anabaptist thought regarding the “*positive* role of civil institutions outside the church.”<sup>23</sup> This leads him to recognize the tragic limits of nonviolence and the ambiguity surrounding ethical choices, a position bearing clear evidence of Niebuhrian Christian realism.<sup>24</sup>

In one sense, the divergences in Weaver’s and Reimer’s theologies can be traced to their different national contexts. Weaver notes that the hegemony of “civil religion” which threatens American Mennonites is virtually absent in the multicultural Canadian context. Though American Mennonites stress their distinctiveness to the point of militancy as a reaction against the cultural “melting pot,” in Weaver’s view the Canadian multicultural “mosaic” poses an equally serious threat of Mennonite complacency with regard to maintaining a distinctive religious identity.<sup>25</sup> But the debate is clearly not reducible to nationalities alone. Their interpretations of Yoder also comprise a key difference between their views. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner contend that Reimer views Yoder’s peace theology as “too idealistic” and that Weaver sets out to defend Yoder by depicting peace as “the tail that wags the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21–22, 271; Reimer, “Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology,” 33–34; A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 30, 34, 257.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 291, and *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 1–3; emphasis in original. Paul G. Doerksen calls Reimer’s project “a more orthodox version of Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus*.” See Doerksen, “Introduction,” in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, xiv.

<sup>24</sup> A. James Reimer, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church’s Teachings and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 173, 131; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 276–79. This places Reimer closer to Mennonite theologian J. Lawrence Burkholder than to Yoder.

<sup>25</sup> Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 34, 38–39.

theological dog.”<sup>26</sup> But such a distinction is only a partial truth; as we have seen, Weaver is not straightforwardly Yoderian, nor is Reimer essentially anti-Yoderian.

Instead, I contend that the two thinkers define the Anabaptist core differently, which both influences and is influenced by the significantly different wider theological conversations they join. Although both set out to revise Anabaptist-Mennonite theology for the present context, they disagree about what this theology stands in need of, or what would render it more systematic or consistent. Weaver’s emphases on peace ethics and social justice lead him to liberative theologies and liberation methodologies that begin with praxis and use it as a measure for theological reflection (revealing vestiges of violence in Mennonite theology, Christology, and soteriology), whereas Reimer, stressing theological orthodoxy, finds the Mennonite tendency toward orthopraxy to be theologically thin—i.e., lacking a more robust theological foundation as the measure for ethics. As will become clear below, these distinct starting points significantly affect how the two theologians view peace or nonviolence. Reimer arguably sees peace as primarily the avoidance of violence (hence his concern with its limiting God); Weaver sees it as an active ethic of peacemaking, a view that I find more compelling. With these contextual and methodological differences in mind, I now turn to Reimer’s and Weaver’s debate concerning God, nonviolence, and the cross.

### **Who Was Crucified? Trinity, Atonement, and God’s “Otherness”**

As implied above, Weaver’s case for God’s nonviolence is based both on the Mennonite tradition of Christocentric, biblical peace/nonviolence and on feminist and womanist denunciations of traditional interpretations of the atonement as depictions of “divine child abuse” that encourage women and others to submit passively to abuse and oppression (on the assumption that all forms of suffering are equally and inherently redemptive). In holding together these twin critiques of violence, Weaver concludes that there is greater fluidity between Jesus Christ and God the Creator or “Father”

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner, “Introduction,” in *The New Yoder*, ed. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), xi n3, xii.

than has been emphasized in traditional atonement theories.<sup>27</sup> “The classic orthodox formulation of the Trinity emphasizes that each person of the Trinity participates in all of the attributes of God,” he says. Thus, he adds, “Jesus as the revelation of God reveals the very character and being of God.”<sup>28</sup> This “high Christology” leads Weaver to follow feminist and womanist theologians in critiquing atonement theories that depict God as either causing or requiring Jesus’ suffering and death for the sake of salvation, especially the 11th-century substitutionary-satisfaction model developed by Anselm of Canterbury, which emphasizes God’s need for the violent “justice” of the cross to restore God’s honor, and, to a lesser extent, the moral influence model developed by Anselm’s near-contemporary, Peter Abelard, which emphasizes the cross as an exemplary act of self-sacrifice or self-destructive “love.”<sup>29</sup> In Weaver’s words:

[I]f Jesus rejected the sword and his actions portrayed the nonviolent confrontation of evil in making the reign of God visible, then it ought not to be thinkable that the God who is revealed in Jesus would orchestrate the death of Jesus in a scheme that assumed doing justice meant the violence of punishment, or a scheme in which a divinely sanctioned death paid a debt to restore God’s honor. If Jesus truly reveals God the Father, then it would be a contradiction for Jesus to be nonviolent and for God to bring about salvation through divinely orchestrated violence. . . .<sup>30</sup>

In order to avoid the pitfalls of both Anselm’s and Abelard’s atonement theories— notions of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering, respectively, which many feminists and womanists find deeply problematic—Weaver offers “narrative Christus Victor,” a variation on the classic, patristic-era Christus Victor theory but with novel emphases. He presents the atonement as God’s nonviolent victory over the powers of sin, death, and violence in a theory stressing the life, death, and resurrection narratives of Jesus Christ as exemplary narratives of divine nonviolent

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<sup>27</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 5-8, 224.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 166, 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

resistance.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Weaver's appeal to an orthodox view of the Trinity, Reimer vehemently disagrees with him, arguing that Weaver essentially presents "Jesusology," collapsing the Trinity into its second person.<sup>32</sup> In Reimer's view the Trinity encompasses "diversity within unity," three distinct persons who nevertheless cooperate:

(1) God the Father represents the unbegotten and mysterious origin of all things, the one who has power over life and death, and can in his hidden way turn violence (which in itself is evil) into good, and thereby bring about the providential divine purpose; (2) God the Son or Word as incarnated in Jesus the Christ reveals the mystery of redemption through nonviolent love and the cross, the reconciliation of God and humanity, and embodies the standard for all Christian ethics; and (3) the Holy Spirit as the great reconciler and sanctifier who is the mysterious source of life, power, and reconciliation of all things separated by sin and the fall.<sup>33</sup>

Against the Mennonite tendency to use the Sermon on the Mount as the sole measure for ethics, which leads to Weaver's alleged reduction of God to Jesus, Reimer proposes his "theocentric Christology" as an alternative basis for a theologically sound peace ethic. At stake for Reimer is the mysterious otherness of God as reflected in classical or orthodox theology, God's ability to judge evil and bring meaning out of violence and suffering, and the diversity of images of God portrayed in the Bible, some violent and some nonviolent.<sup>34</sup> With regard to the cross, Reimer is likewise uncomfortable with reducing the atonement to a single theory, as Weaver does, arguing that all three traditional theories "have biblical support," and countering the accusation of "divine child abuse" by appealing to Trinitarian

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 114, 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 272.

<sup>33</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 34. See also 171-73 and *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 287.

<sup>34</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 273, 491, 280-81, and A. James Reimer, *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 21, 39.

intimacy, such that the cross signifies the death of Godself rather than the death of the Son at the hands of the Father.<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Reimer, “God cannot be said to be nonresistant and pacifist in any strict, univocal sense.”<sup>36</sup>

Many of Reimer’s concerns are shared by other Mennonite theologians, particularly the concern to preserve God’s absolute otherness by not imposing nonviolent ethics on God.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, J. Alexander Sider contends that both Weaver and Reimer attempt to “domesticate” God or to render God “a stable referent for our speech,” since both limit God to either nonviolence or violence alone. Sider posits that Reimer, in particular, misuses apophatic or negative theology, which is not simply the “denial of positive claims about God” but comprises part of the paradoxical/metaphorical quality of theological language (which must *both* assert *and* deny every concept used for God). Thus, as framed by Sider, both Weaver’s assertion of God’s pacifism and Reimer’s denial thereof constitute attempts to hem God in and, incidentally, fall under Reimer’s definition of heresy as reduction, narrowing, or “the part wanting to be the whole.”<sup>38</sup>

But Sider is also more cognizant than Reimer of the particularity and immanence of God’s otherness, and is critical of Reimer’s “incipient Trinitarian modalism” and its accompanying “inadequate Christology.” For Sider, the Incarnation itself is “ultimately and unimaginably strange.” Thus it is simplistic to equate divine otherness with transcendence alone, as Reimer implies, without taking the otherness of God’s immanence into account, as present in “the Christian story.”<sup>39</sup> This turn from abstract divine otherness to particularity, especially God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, aligns Sider with Weaver’s narrative-centered high Christology.<sup>40</sup> However, based on Weaver, I would add nonviolent resistance, itself profoundly counterintuitive and

<sup>35</sup> Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 40–41.

<sup>36</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487, 492.

<sup>37</sup> Also see Miroslav Volf’s arguments in Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 251.

<sup>38</sup> Sider critiques Scott Holland as well. J. Alexander Sider, “The Hiddenness of God and the Justice of God: Negative Theology as Social Ethical Resource,” in *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice*, ed. David L. Weaver-Zercher and William H. Willimon (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 120–22, and Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Sider, “Hiddenness of God,” 122. See also Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, “O Sweet Exchange: The Cross of Christ in the Drama of Reconciliation,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 279–86.

<sup>40</sup> Sider, “Hiddenness of God,” 122.



mysterious, to the particularity of God's otherness, something that neither Reimer nor Sider recognizes. In fact, because Reimer refuses to privilege Jesus' nonviolence, it becomes unclear what exactly Jesus reveals about God if anything, resulting in a form of Christological agnosticism. With the exception of the moment of the cross, Reimer does not allow Jesus' message and example to permeate or even color his understanding of God, implying, somewhat ironically, a low Christology.

With regard to the cross, I suggest that Weaver's view of the Trinity is not sufficiently fluid precisely at the moment of crucifixion, which forecloses on any constructive meaning the cross might have in relation to human suffering. Although Weaver describes God as with Jesus throughout his life, death, and resurrection, he also argues that God "give[s] up the Son" to death on the cross: "God did not intervene in Jesus' death and allowed Jesus to die in fulfillment of his mission to bring redemption to all people." In addition, Weaver rejects the idea that the cross signifies God's love, since that line of argument fails to overcome the problem of God requiring violence (in this case, divine self-harm or "suicide") to show God's love.<sup>41</sup> While Weaver's concerns for avoiding the glorification of suffering and violence are legitimate, he neglects the experiences of those (including womanists and feminists) who find meaning in the cross insofar as it represents God's solidarity with those who suffer—symbolized, for instance, by imaging the crucified Christ as a woman, something that Weaver does not explore. Some thinkers argue that this view of the cross does not trap those who suffer in their pain or masochistically glorify it but, conversely, makes their resistance possible through God's nearness and sustaining love in the midst of struggle.<sup>42</sup> In privileging some feminist and womanist voices over others, Weaver maintains a harsh distance between Jesus and God at the moment of the cross, speaking of (a very human) Jesus' unwavering "obedience" to God's way of nonviolence as the only redeeming factor in the event of the crucifixion, the only way it was indirectly "willed by God." Here Weaver and

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<sup>41</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 44, 166-67, 245 n69; Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> See Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 77. She writes of a woman who has undergone trauma, finding meaning in the cross signifying that God "gets me. He knows" what it is like to suffer trauma. See also Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148.

Reimer share a low Christology, except that in Weaver's view it seems that Jesus must bear his suffering alone.<sup>43</sup>

Still, Weaver's effort to radically distance God from a punitive understanding of justice is warranted. Reimer and others who argue against feminist and womanist accusations of "divine child abuse" in the idea that God crucifies Godself overlook the fact that, as Weaver puts it, this argument "does not address the underlying, fundamentally violent assumption of satisfaction atonement, that divine justice requires the violence of punishment." For Weaver, it is necessary to reintroduce "the devil" or the powers of evil into the atonement and to comprehend that they, not God, were responsible for the cross; the difference between Jesus' (nonviolent) resurrection and his violent death encapsulates the distinction between "the *modus operandi* of the reign of God" and "that of the rule of evil."<sup>44</sup>

Although Reimer fears this line of thought leaves God helpless in the face of evil and violence (implying that the cross is a symbol of divine helplessness and an inadequate response to evil, sin, and violence, according to Darrin W. Snyder Belousek),<sup>45</sup> Weaver's emphasis on the resurrection as an act of forgiveness suggests that God's way of confronting evil and sin is profoundly mysterious as well. Because of his attention to those who have historically been told that "submission to abusive authority [is] a virtue," Weaver calls himself a "recovering nonresistant Mennonite" and thus advocates human *and divine* nonviolent resistance to evil, seen most clearly in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God confronts, and deals with, violence but is not limited to the tactics of retaliation and further violence.<sup>46</sup> Reimer and others begin with a human sense of justice as punitive and violent, thereby accepting the assumption that peace, understood as nonresistance, is passive and limited. But Weaver, beginning with the nonviolent life of Jesus Christ and the mystery of the resurrection, arrives at this dramatically

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<sup>43</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 299, 244-45 n69. See also 91-92. It remains unclear whether Weaver is promoting the doctrine of divine impassability or not. I would argue that he is, at least implicitly.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 251, 308.

<sup>45</sup> See Belousek's response to Peter W. Martens. Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 423 n38.

<sup>46</sup> Weaver, "Response," 39; Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 47, 237, 308, 37, 42.

“other” and transformed definition of justice as nonviolent.

Thus, Weaver’s assertion of God’s nonviolence does not, as Reimer contends, impinge upon God’s “otherness.” Rather, if we emphasize the intimacy between God and Jesus Christ such that we can speak of the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of *God*, then divine otherness is redefined. No longer an abstract, transcendent otherness, it paradoxically becomes a radically particular, immanent form of otherness that includes the counter-intuitive “otherness” of nonviolence, peacemaking, and restorative justice as God’s acts of peaceable resistance to evil and sin—acts that Christians are called to imitate, even image. This brings me to questions of Christian ethics, and the disagreement between Reimer and Weaver there.

### **Which Discipleship? Nonviolent Ethics and the Imitation of God**

Reimer’s emphasis on God’s otherness leads him to make a twofold claim about human ethics: on the one hand, Christians are to imitate Jesus Christ and be nonviolent; on the other, nonviolence cannot be projected onto God, who is beyond human ethics. These two are linked, since it is “precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.” God’s violence, wrath, and judgement, far from operating as a summons for human violence, make human nonviolence possible.<sup>47</sup> However, Reimer is not an absolute pacifist, and he rejects the notion that nonviolence alone can address the complex conflicts of the present global context (genocide, new forms of terrorism, etc.), and the enormous responsibility to “protect vulnerable people.”<sup>48</sup> He finds support for holy war, just war, and pacifism in the Bible. He is therefore is less concerned with avoiding violence at all costs and more suspicious of claims that it is possible to purify oneself or the church from complicity in all forms of violence; because of the reality of sin, even those committed to nonviolence can carry out such an ethic only in “penultimate and fragmentary ways.”

Here, Reimer presents a middle way between the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, who spoke of the “impossibility (of following the Jesus

<sup>47</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487, 492.

<sup>48</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 158-59, 156, 160.

ethic),” and a Mennonite peace ethic, which does not permit sin “to cancel out the normativity of love.”<sup>49</sup> Reimer’s proposed middle way involves “just policing,” which aims “to restrain evil and maintain order for the common good,” and thus constitutes an alternative to war and its “culture of killing.” While just policing cannot avoid the use of violence, even deadly violence, it can be guided by the call to love the enemy.<sup>50</sup> Through the atonement, Reimer argues, God “forgives us our sins, even our violence, without excusing them,” since “the loving God is amid death and violence in ways that are not clear to us.”<sup>51</sup>

As suggested above, Weaver holds more absolutely to nonviolent resistance, but also accounts for the reality of sin, making human evil directly responsible for the violence of the cross instead of attempting to excuse it as God’s will or as necessary for redemption. To sin is to side with the powers of evil against God, and thus to be responsible for the cross. The alternative offered by God

occurs when we switch sides, from the side of the powers arrayed against the rule of God to the side of the reign of God. This . . . engages our own responsibility. It is represented by Jesus’ call, “Follow me,” which is presumed in the Anabaptist emphasis on “discipleship.” On the other hand . . . we cannot save ourselves, we cannot successfully oppose the powers of evil on our own. We need help. That help is the transforming action of God to grab us and change us to the side of the reign of God in spite of ourselves. To put that in trinitarian language, this transforming action is the Holy Spirit. . . .<sup>52</sup>

Weaver does not place his hope in our ability to turn away from sin on our own, nor is he naïvely optimistic about what the life of faith

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, 131, 113, and Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 67-68.

<sup>50</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 159, 167, 169-70; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 494. Strikingly, Hauerwas states that the *church* is the Christian alternative to war. See Stanley Hauerwas, “On Being a Church Capable of Addressing a World at War: A Pacifist Response to the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral *In Defence of Creation* (1988),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 429.

<sup>51</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 173; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 492.

<sup>52</sup> Weaver, “Response,” 44. Weaver is stressing that Anabaptists do not believe in predestination.

entails, since it may involve suffering and even death, as Jesus exemplifies. In Weaver's words, nonviolent resistance "costs us our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth."<sup>53</sup> Yet, Reimer's concern about ethical oversimplification is applicable to Weaver's understanding of nonviolent resistance. Weaver sets up a stark dichotomy between good and evil, suggesting that those who "switch sides," as he puts it, are somehow no longer complicit in evil.<sup>54</sup> He thus barely brushes the moral ambiguities and tragedies involved in practicing nonviolent resistance, such as weighing conflicting responsibilities, the multiple effects of actions taken and not taken, the complexity of intentions, human capacities for self-deception, and so on.<sup>55</sup> Without diluting his commitment to the viability and possibilities of a nonviolent ethic, Weaver could do more to acknowledge its limits.

However, Reimer's own view is not immune to a similar critique, for he could be said to be overly optimistic concerning policing. He neglects to mention the profound ambiguities involved there, including whether police mainly protect privileged elites and their property, the realities of racial profiling, police brutality, and the level of violence promoted in the training and protocols of police officers, such as "shoot-to-kill."<sup>56</sup> And while Reimer would like to make a sharp distinction between policing and war, the prevalence of police brutality and, for instance, the "policing" role of the Canadian military on an international scale make such a distinction difficult to maintain. In addition, Weaver's critique of the punitive, violent definition of justice within the United States justice system indicates his recognition that even institutions claiming to limit violence actually perpetuate it.<sup>57</sup> With regard to policing, it seems that Reimer actually allows the reality of sin and violence to trump "the normativity of love"; the latter ultimately proves to be inadequate, in his view.

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<sup>53</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 315, 312-13.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*, 318.

<sup>55</sup> For further reflection on the limits of nonviolence, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1977), 68-69, and Stanley Hauerwas, "A Church Capable," 432, 456.

<sup>56</sup> For a similar critique of Reimer's notion of "just policing," see Andy Alexis-Baker, "The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 23-49.

<sup>57</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 2-3.

Perhaps the most striking criticism that Weaver makes of Reimer is his insistence that human behavior images divine behavior. Reimer argues that God's otherness must be preserved, and that God's violence prevents human violence rather than fosters it. Weaver points out that "the key ethical question is whether Christians imitate God's vengeance,"<sup>58</sup> and compares a violent God to "a loving parent who viciously attacks when provoked and then tells the children to 'do as I say, not as I do.'"<sup>59</sup> Remarkably, Reimer retains the image of a violent God *and* interprets one sort of violence (just policing) as a form of enemy-love. Even in this rigorously limited way, Reimer makes a space for humanity to imitate God's violence. Thus, for him, as for Weaver, human ethics do end up imaging God.

This result returns us to the question of how God's otherness is to be understood. Reimer and others are concerned that human notions of nonviolence are projected onto God such that God is made in our image as pacifists. But I would ask how exactly nonviolence reflects the human image since, as Reimer recognizes, even those committed to nonviolence cannot entirely escape complicity in various forms of violence. How can it be that Weaver "put[s] the nonviolent horse before the biblical cart," as Harry J. Huebner argues,<sup>60</sup> when Weaver derives that nonviolence from the Bible itself, i.e., from God's particularly other self-revelation in Christ, as I have argued above? This seems to lead to a chicken-and-egg conundrum: which came first, God's nonviolence or ours?

Combining Reimer's and Weaver's emphases, Belousek argues that while God is free to exercise an "exclusive right to retribution," God's forgiveness offered in the cross indicates that God is "free to transcend retribution" as well.<sup>61</sup> Going beyond Belousek, I contend that limiting God to vengeance and a retributive understanding of justice places greater constraints on God than do notions of God's nonviolent otherness. Restorative justice as glimpsed in Jesus Christ is arguably more profound

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>59</sup> Weaver quoting Sharon Baker in "Response," 46.

<sup>60</sup> Harry J. Huebner, "Atonement: Being Remembered," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, 237.

<sup>61</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 406, 394; emphasis in original. See also Duane K. Friesen, "Is God Nonviolent?," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11, and Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Nonviolent?," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 16-17.

than its alternative, which would confine God to the cycle of violence and retribution.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the case for God's nonviolence is rooted in divine freedom rather than in a misconstrued claim that God cannot be (i.e., is prevented from being) violent, and also establishes that it is God's prior choice to "transcend" retribution and violence which is subsequently imaged by human nonviolence, not the other way around—if the two can even be severed in this way (since God makes possible, and works through, human nonviolence). Although human nonviolence is a limited, imperfect, non-identical image of God's nonviolence, it does not thereby cease to be a realizable and profound possibility, precisely because it has its source in God.

I also take issue with the related assumption that God is simply "other" in the sense of being everything humanity is not, in direct opposition. While Sider expresses concern over this issue from the divine side—in that such an assumption reduces divine otherness to transcendence alone and fails adequately to account for the paradox of divine immanence, especially the immanent transcendence of the Incarnation—the problem arises from the human side as well, namely, that divine otherness understood simply as "other-than-humanity" also presupposes an abstract and generic humanity. That is, when Reimer and others insist that God is "other," the crucial question "Other than who?" remains unanswered. If God simply replicates human impulses toward retributive violence on a grander scale, then God is not "other" than those who dominate, which results in a god limited to a violent understanding of justice and power. As nonviolent feminist-liberationist theologian Dorothee Soelle wonders, "Why should we honor and love a being who does not transcend the moral level of contemporary culture as shaped by men, but instead establishes it?"<sup>63</sup>

In claiming that God is "other" than the powerful, privileged, and dominating, one arguably touches on God's mystery in a radical way. This is where Weaver's turn to the experiences of the oppressed is so crucial.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Weaver speaks of the "cyclical nature of violence" in *Nonviolent God*, 143-44.

<sup>63</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 24-25, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Elaine Swartzentruber makes a similar point, arguing that "It matters where we stand to view the violence" in the world, and in sharing the perspective of the oppressed "perhaps all violence looks like violence," instead of God's presumably loving judgment. See her "Response 2" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 42-44.

Yet even Weaver does not go far enough in championing this form of divine otherness, for in his understanding God is still in control of history, as seen most clearly in the resurrection as God's unequivocal victory over evil.<sup>65</sup> As Sider rightly points out, such arguments imply that God's power is the same as that employed by the powers of evil, that God is somehow "in competition with created powers" and "the only issue is quantity" of power. Though he makes a case for the "incomparability of God's power,"<sup>66</sup> I suggest, with Soelle, that it is rather a matter of God's power being of an altogether different sort—namely, the "shared power" of vulnerability and love, which places God in solidarity with those who suffer (e.g., Matt. 25). Only this redefinition of divine power can sidestep the questions of theodicy that invariably arise with notions of God's control over history (i.e., questions around the inaction of a presumably omnipotent God in the face of innocent human suffering—or divine bystanderism),<sup>67</sup> and thus make for a more thoroughly nonviolent view of God. And this would of course intensify the Christian incentive to renounce violence and embrace vulnerability as well, since Christians are called to image the vulnerable God of peace in the world.<sup>68</sup>

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Despite their great differences (and the related absence of that co-authored volume), Weaver and Reimer together provide a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics of late 20th-century Mennonite theology as it moves into systematic theology. I side with Weaver in privileging the particular nonviolence of the narratives of Jesus over abstract notions of God's otherness that limit God to a violent paradigm and spill over into blessing human violence. Informed

<sup>65</sup> In *Nonviolent God*, Weaver takes several tentative steps in the direction of divine "vulnerability" and "risk" but then reasserts God's omnipotence. Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 103, 269, 269 n32, 143-44.

<sup>66</sup> J. Alexander Sider, "Who Durst Defy the Omnipotent to Arms': The Nonviolent Atonement and a Non-Competitive Doctrine of God," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, 251, 253, 259.

<sup>67</sup> See Soelle, *Suffering*, 92-95.

<sup>68</sup> Soelle abandons resurrection as a supernatural event in abandoning God's omnipotence. See *Theology for Skeptics*, 103ff., 117, and Dorothee Soelle, *The Mystery of Death*, trans. Nancy and Martin Lukens-Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 83, 71, 132. See also Friesen's similar critique of Volf in Friesen, "Is God Nonviolent?" 11.



by the concerns of Reimer and other theologians, Mennonite and beyond, I find it helpful to reframe Weaver's assertion of divine nonviolence in terms of a transformed understanding of God's "otherness," not simply as divine inscrutability but as an invitation to participate in God's nonviolent transformation of humanity and the world, which involves an awareness of the limitedness—but also the profound possibilities—of human nonviolent ethics.

Ultimately I must say with Sider that God both is and is not a pacifist, or rather is and is not nonviolent. God is not nonviolent in Reimer's sense of simply avoiding or failing to address violence, which suggests a god constructed in the image of human understandings of passive nonresistance. I would agree with Reimer—as, I believe, would Weaver!—that God is no *nonresistant* pacifist. But God is nonviolent in Weaver's sense of being the originator and source of a peace which in its otherness "surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), and yet is revealed in Jesus Christ as being so immanently transcendent, so near to humanity, that God desires and makes it possible for Christians to image and incarnate it in this world of violence, retribution, and domination. Thus, as the above study suggests, though Weaver's response to this question makes significant strides in the right direction—taking seriously the experiences of the oppressed, including women, for a more consistently nonviolent Mennonite peace theology—more remains to be done. The vestiges of violence identified by Weaver are not the only problematic aspects of Mennonite peace theology. Mennonites have more to learn from feminists and womanists about the vestiges of power as absolute control and domination that remain within our peace theology and that require the further re-imagining of God as reflecting and resisting the suffering of "the least" through God's mysterious, vulnerable nonviolence.

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# Doubt, Defiance, and Desire

Jeff Gundy

## ***Explanatory Note***

*As I finished drafting an essay on “creative doubt” in contemporary poetry and writing in summer 2014, I was flattered by nearly simultaneous invitations to present the S.A. Yoder Lecture at Goshen College and the Bechtel Lectures at Conrad Grebel University College, both in Fall 2014.<sup>1</sup> Since this piece was not yet in print, and my summer travels and fall schedule would make writing another substantial new one very difficult, I asked if I might present adapted versions of this essay at both colleges. At Grebel I also gave a second lecture and poetry reading under the title “Circling Defiance.” What follows, then, is in three parts: a brief overview of “creative doubt” and particular Mennonite versions of it; a much-condensed, revised version of the second night’s reading and commentary; and related speculations on desire.*

## **On Creative Doubt and Mennonite Writing**

My recent book *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace*, contains essays on “theopoetics,” attempting to engage theological issues and questions using the techniques and approaches of poetry. In “Poetry, the Sleeping King, and Creative Doubt” I continue with this endeavor, trying to demonstrate that the right varieties of doubt are generative and even crucial for many writers. The right, creative sort of doubt is not “enervating cynicism, mere disbelief, easy scorn, mindless relativism,” I write there, but a flexible and open-minded skepticism, a persistent curiosity, a sense that revelation is not complete and that God always has more to say.

In developing this argument I turned to some usual suspects—William Blake, John Keats, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot—though I made

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<sup>1</sup> The essay, “Poetry, the Sleeping King, and Creative Doubt,” is in *CrossCurrents* 64, no. 4 (December 2014): 466-88. Special thanks to Lester Bechtel and the Bechtel family for their support of the Bechtel Lectures, and to Marlene Epp, Hildi Froese Tiessen, Paul Tiessen, Trevor Bechtel, Troy Osborne, and Rob Zacharias at Conrad Grebel University College. Many thanks also to the family of S.A. Yoder and Ann Hostetler at Goshen College.

uneasy bedfellows of them, and also discussed poets who take up religious issues, such as Mary Szybist and Fanny Howe. I engaged some poets with Anabaptist connections, especially Julia Spicher Kasdorf and William Stafford, but mainly I examined how the practice of creative doubt ran through contemporary poetry, rather than focusing on Anabaptist and Mennonite authors and texts. In adapting the essay for presentation, I had some new thoughts. Perhaps the most intriguing one was that the category of creative doubt might apply meaningfully to a great deal of what we now call Mennonite/s writing. Creative doubt as a category might be a skeleton key to much of the work produced in both Canada and the United States during the Mennonite literary renaissance. Sometimes this doubt concerns God, but more often it takes the form of variously expressed and focused doubt about the people, ideologies, and human structures occupying the spaces between God and individual human beings.

I could only sketch this idea hastily during the Grebel lecture, and even now must limit myself to quickly exploring some key authors and texts. My search yielded rich results, however, as I found some variety of creative doubt almost everywhere I looked—and repeatedly had to resist the desire to trace the further twists and turns that these generative doubts took throughout the author’s body of work. In what follows I overlook many subtleties and distinctions for the sake of economy, but I hope this brief list will suggest that creative doubt is indeed pervasive in the rich body of Mennonite writing of the last half-century.

In Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the inevitable starting point for discussions of contemporary Mennonite writing, the young protagonist, Thom Wiens, shares a name with Doubting Thomas.<sup>2</sup> Very early in the novel, as military planes fly over and remind him that World War II is raging, Thom remembers a sermon and the pastor’s insistence that the members of his Mennonite village church “do not have pride,” but “by God’s grace we understand what others do not. . . . [W]e, his followers, conquer only by spiritual love and not by physical force.” The narrator immediately reports Thom’s struggle to take these idealistic claims at face value: “Thom could not doubt such sermons. He had grown up hearing these statements. . . . And truth necessitated following.” But Thom is too smart and introspective to follow

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Paul Tiessen for pointing this out to me.

unquestioningly: “Lying there, he felt doubts settle in his mind like mud in the hollows of the spring-soaked land.”<sup>3</sup> He will learn that his doubts are all too legitimate, and that pride and violence have not in fact been banished from his church or his village.

Dallas Wiebe’s 1969 novel *Skyblue the Badass*,<sup>4</sup> a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* about a young man who leaves his Kansas Mennonite upbringing for a series of worldly adventures in graduate school, is at least as skeptical about his Mennonite community, though this author’s later work would tack back in rather amazing ways toward reclaiming Mennonite identity and faith. *Skyblue* was reviewed in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times Book Review*, but its prose was evidently too eccentric to win many readers, either Mennonite or English.

Patrick Friesen’s many books of poems, including titles like *The Shunning* and *You Don’t Get to Be a Saint*, are shot through with vivid and fertile doubts about his relations to the world and the divine. *Blasphemer’s Wheel: Selected and New Poems* begins with the brief “Waiting for the Gods,” reprinted here in its entirety:

at night dripping mares stand on the beach  
 white and honey manes  
                                   not a muscle in motion  
                                   they look out to sea  
 a step  
 and ghostly splash

in the morning water swims over the moon-prints  
 this must be the place where I wait for nothing<sup>5</sup>

As we might expect, there is no divine revelation here; the wait is “for nothing,” if we expect God to descend with trumpets blaring. Yet there is a hint of other-than-human majesty in those dripping horses with their “white

<sup>3</sup> Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962), 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Wiebe, *Skyblue the Badass* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Friesen, “Waiting for the Gods,” *Blasphemer’s Wheel: Selected and New Poems* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 3. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

and honey manes” and the “ghostly splash” of their departure. This spiritual questing and questioning, and the search for metaphysical presence in the physical world, will be at the heart of all Friesen’s work.

In the foreword of Di Brandt’s *Questions I Asked my Mother*<sup>6</sup>—the first words of the first book of her distinguished career—Brandt defines the speaker of her poems as “the good Mennonite daughter I tried so / unsuccessfully to become,” “the one who asked too / many questions    who argued with the father & with / God    who always took things always went too far / who questioned every thing” (n.p.). The book’s main project, surely, is to find language for the questions and doubts that fill a smart young woman with a strict, religious father in a patriarchal village. Again, this rigorous inquiry into the costs, griefs, and available joys of a patriarchal, violent, capitalist culture will persist through many variations and developments in Brandt’s work.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf’s *Sleeping Preacher*, written mostly from an urban vantage point, doubts rural and Anabaptist prejudices about the city, Catholics, and “the world.” In the opening poem, “Green Market, New York,” the speaker, a young Menno gone off to the city, meets an Amish woman from her home valley, selling pies at a farmer’s market:

“Do you live in the city?” she asks, “do you like it?”  
 I say no. And that was no lie, Emma Peachey.  
 I don’t like New York, but sometimes these streets  
 hold me as hard as we’re held by rich earth.  
 I have not forgotten that Bible verse:  
 Whoever puts his hand to the plow and looks back  
 is not fit for the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

Kasdorf remarked years later in an essay that she didn’t understand the last lines for a long time, but likes Ken Nafziger’s view of them as a “denunciation of guilt”<sup>8</sup> (“Mourning”). I agree that makes sense, but I think

<sup>6</sup> Di Brandt, *Questions I Asked my Mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987), xx.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kasdorf, *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kasdorf, “Mourning, Melancholy and the Mennonites,” Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests, October

they also are a refusal of one kind of doubt—the sort that might send a young poet back to the farm from the city—and a claim of another, more creative doubt—the kind that sends the poet to the city in the first place, searching for a different life, and for a voice that those like Emma Peachey would not dare to claim.

The list might be extended past first books, of course. In the multitude of texts tracing the Mennonite experience in Ukraine and its aftermath, idyllic visions of “forever summer” mingle with others that raise doubts about the *Selbstschutz*, the oppression of Russian peasants, choices made during and after the diaspora, and much more. Sandra Birdsell’s *The Russländer*<sup>9</sup> opens with a description of the young Katya’s myopia: “Being near-sighted was not a hindrance. She learned this from early on, through inference and the attitudes of people around her. What went on beyond the borders of her Russian Mennonite oasis was not worth noticing. Because she was born female she could expect to dwell safely within the circumference of her privileged world.” Of course, both Katya’s privilege and her safety within the “Mennonite oasis” will prove entirely illusory.

South of the border one finds Keith Ratzlaff’s book of poems *Dubious Angels*,<sup>10</sup> written in conversation with Paul Klee’s late drawings of angels. The opening poem, “Forgetful Angel,” doubts even memory, among its multiple uncertainties: “Here I lose / my own hands / even in my own lap.” Near the end comes a surprisingly bold claim: “God is a chair / to sit in / and the act of sitting,” but the poem closes on two less confident similes: “Like a ring once on my finger / Like a road / disappearing in the trees.”<sup>11</sup>

I must cease multiplying examples, but surely this theme continues. Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*<sup>12</sup> doubts and complicates once more all the categories of good and bad, worthy and wasteful, life-giving and life-denying. Her new book, *All My Puny Sorrows*, seems shot through with a sad and brilliant creative doubt. Again, the narrator, Yolandi, has

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2004, [www.bmcgbt.org/kasdorf.shtml](http://www.bmcgbt.org/kasdorf.shtml), accessed December 16, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Birdsell, *The Russländer* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Ratzlaff, *Dubious Angels: Poems after Paul Klee* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga, 2005), 3, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Though I hesitate to place it in this august company, my first book of poems was titled *Inquiries*, and many of the poems are constructed in a question/answer format. (I wanted to call it *Inquiries into the Technology of Hell*, but was dissuaded by a wise editor.)

<sup>12</sup> Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007).

her doubts about God: “I willed my hands to stop trembling and ruffled my hair a bit and prayed to a God I only half believed in. Why are we always told that God will answer our prayers if we believe in Him? Why can’t he ever make the first move?” But this is only the mildest level of her doubts; her questions about human institutions are much more stringent. She not only questions but deeply mistrusts the Mennonite elders of East Village: “Shortly after that . . . the bishop (the alpha Mennonite) came to our house for what he liked to call a visit. Sometimes he referred to himself as a cowboy and these encounters as ‘mending fences.’ But in reality it was more of a raid. He showed up on a Saturday in a convoy with his usual posse of elders. . . .”

The village as a whole does not escape Yolandi’s harsh, witty judgments of its hostility toward girls, women, and psychic dissidents: “When she graduated [my mother] turned the spare bedroom into an office and a steady stream of sad and angry Mennonites came to our house, usually in secret because therapy was seen as lower even than bestiality because at least bestiality is somewhat understandable in isolated farming communities.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Yolandi’s scorn for the whole “Menno cosmology” as she encounters it is both boundless and (strangely) bracing:

We have Rich Cousins who are extremely rich because they are the sons of the sons (our uncles, all dead) who inherited the lucrative family business from our grandfather. . . . In the Menno cosmology that’s how it goes down. The sons inherit the wealth and pass it on to their sons and to their sons and to their sons and the daughters get sweet fuck all. We Poor Cousins don’t care at all though, except for when we’re on welfare, broke, starving. . . . But whatever, we descendants of the Girl Line may not have wealth and proper windows in our drafty homes but at least we have rage and we will build *empires* with that, gentlemen.<sup>14</sup>

Further exploration and finer-grained analysis of the many varieties and gradations of creative doubt in Mennonite/s writing must await another

<sup>13</sup> Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2014), 70–71, 16, 131.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

occasion. But it does not seem accidental or trivial that skeptical attention to master narratives, and the creation of alternative narratives, should turn up everywhere in this vital and continually expanding body of literature. Not only among those known as dissidents can the various flowers and figures of doubt, sometimes sad and sometimes lovely and sometimes both, be found. I end by echoing a key claim of Jennifer Hecht's major study *Doubt: A History*: "Doubt . . . gets a lot done."<sup>15</sup>

### Defiance, or Something Near It

For many years I have been an insider in the Mennonite literary community—a tenured faculty member at a Mennonite college, involved in planning several Mennonite/s Writing conferences and on programs as poet and critic, frequently invited to read and speak at Mennonite colleges. My poem "How to Write the New Mennonite Poem," among others, is frequently cited in these circles as a sort of manifesto, although its rather fussy and (I thought) comic instructions have been taken more seriously by critics than by other Mennonite poets (I stand with the poets on that).

Despite this status and the privilege that accompanies it, I have persistently tried to avoid making dogmatic statements about what Mennonite writers ought to do or not do, and have warned against taking any particular text or author as "the" definitive Mennonite one, given the enormous range of experience and ideologies within the category of "Mennonite," even in North America. In a chapter of my recent *Songs from an Empty Cage*, titled "Declining to Be in Charge," I wrote, "There is no *Ordnung* for poets, at least none that I recognize, and certainly not one that I have any desire to create or enforce."<sup>16</sup> Even earlier, for the 1997 Mennonite/s Writing conference I wrote a little essay in praise of lurkers, internal exiles, those never quite at home, despite everything—a situation that describes my own sense of location pretty well.<sup>17</sup>

This position of being both within a particular community (religious,

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 486.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Gundy, *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2013), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Gundy, "In Praise of the Lurkers (Who Come Out to Speak)," in *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2005), 133-41.



local, national, or otherwise) and incompletely assimilated into it, preserving a certain interior and sometimes exterior resistance, is the one that my recent book of poems names as “Somewhere Near Defiance.” It is virtually a necessity for poets, writers, and artists, although some find it more difficult than others. In my particular circumstances, it has led to both warm, supportive relationships with many Mennonite writers and critics and a fair measure of creative doubt about the Mennonite sphere I inhabit—and similarly mixed feelings about the larger culture I inhabit. Really, how can any writer, any alert human being, exist in entirely comfortable harmony with his or her immediate community and the world as it is? The many defects of this world cry out for our attention, just as its many beauties cry out for our praise. Surely defiance and its dark brother, despair, are the wellsprings of much poetry and most fiction. To reckon and contend with all this, to reckon things as they are and might be as rightly as we can, is to practice defiance.

*Somewhere Near Defiance*,<sup>18</sup> as the title suggests, is situated in this rather muddled middle. Defiance is a real town, not far from me in northwest Ohio, once the site of Fort Defiance (established by the stalwart Indian-fighter and general “Mad” Anthony Wayne), and before that a Native American settlement. Living comfortably ensconced near so much largely forgotten history, in the midst of a declining but still mighty empire, what sort of life is possible, what kind of resistance is necessary?

Many of the poems find their beginnings quite simply, in immediate circumstances, and then become entangled and complicated by larger themes, ideas, and images that enter through memory and association. Lurkers may seem like loners, but we often carry all sorts of conversation partners around with us. Some are adversaries, others allies, as feminist theologian Grace Jantzen has become for me. This poem broods on her scorching critique of the Yahweh of the first books of the Old Testament.

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<sup>18</sup> Jeff Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga, 2014). All poems from this collection are reprinted with permission of the publisher.

## MEDITATION WITH MUDDY WOODS AND SWINGING BRIDGE

*[The covenant] is structured in violence and steeped in blood,  
from the blood of circumcision and endless animal slaughter to  
brutal extermination of the 'people of the land.'*

— Grace Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*<sup>19</sup>

Hot wind from the west. Trail still soft after a whole week's drying.

Deer tracks, coon, one stubborn mud-hiker's deep scours, each like a little boat or long wet nest.

Wood piled everywhere—neat rows for woodstoves, heaps of trash and branches.

We were in Salzburg when a great storm scattered the old trees on the Kapuzinerberg like pickup sticks.

Today I brought nothing but pens, keys, comb, notebook, bicycle, lock, wallet and credit cards.

And knees a big black fly seems to like, and shorts with a pocket ripped two summers ago, still not fixed.

Morning reading: What kind of God would drown every living thing that wouldn't fit on some puny ark? Would slaughter the people of Canaan for the sake of one hungry band of nomads?

Many good gravel paths lead from the subdivision into the woods, but only the animals use them.

Somebody's cutting something hard in a dry swimming pool.

Who discovered we could cast our anger at the sky and get it back named God?

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<sup>19</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

In my old house the bathroom sink plugs up every four months but I know exactly how to swear and clear it.

Small white blooms all over the multiflora rose, bushes twice my size.

Seed pods float in the pond like mothers determined to tan whether or not their children get lost in the bushes.

On a day this hot and green it seems crazy to think that God picks sides.

One plank of the swinging bridge is missing, one bowed and soft, and a big lost branch is wedged high between the end posts, but I walk across it anyway.<sup>20</sup>

Jantzen defies the narrative of tribalism and conquest, as she defies the image of a vengeful, jealous, patriarchal, tribal deity who demands blood sacrifice and slaughters “enemies” wholesale. In the poem, I find myself sharing much of her viewpoint, but in the context of contemporary Midwestern rural serenity and order, with the ruthless enterprises which ensure that order distant and nearly invisible.

The middle section of *Somewhere Near Defiance* contains seven short “Contemplations,” poems written during a canoe trip on Minnesota’s Boundary Waters. In this sprawling setting of lakes, trees, and rocky islands, all motorized vehicles are forbidden, and the five of us took off our watches and shut off our cell phones. There was no chance of leaving civilization *entirely* behind, of course, but as we paddled and portaged through open spaces we did find some distance from much of the usual clutter of culture and daily demands and expectations.

#### CONTEMPLATION ON RULES AND LINES

One law for lion and ox is oppression, but of which one?

The ghost of William Blake, gnarled and smiling in the hollow  
between tree and stone, refuses to say.

<sup>20</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 26-27.

One law for water and rock is precision. Whenever they meet,  
water does all the talking.

Another law is rubbing. Another can be spoken clearly only in loon.  
Another takes 300 Earth years to state in full.

A lost fishline dangles like a strand of the golden thread, left behind  
by a traveler who went back home with nothing but bug bites and a  
solid case of jock itch.

I'm not so careful myself but I wish I were, and I tell myself that  
counts for something.

The wind's law is this: be yourself, and I will show you what that is.

The water's law is this: Tell me anything. Only my face will answer.  
I will hold the little ones in their little boats, I will let them go  
where they choose if they have the strength.

I will tell them what they must know, even if it breaks their backs  
or their hearts.

I will tell them what they want to know only if they ask very softly,  
and more than once.<sup>21</sup>

The poet desires to listen and see deeply, to pay the sort of “spontaneous, sober attention” that German romantic poet-philosopher Novalis recommended we devote to the world—but really not a great deal is revealed. Since Wordsworth, at least, some of us have hoped to gain wisdom and instruction from the natural world, but it proves generally to be an austere and taciturn teacher. It is good to doubt if not defy the more sentimental messages we may be tempted to think we have received.

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<sup>21</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 52.

CONTEMPLATION ON RAIN AND RELIGION

*I've decided that I'm religious but not spiritual.*

—Gregory Wolfe

I always feel more religious in the sunshine,  
especially if it's not hot and the place is pretty

and most people can't afford to get there or just  
don't bother. Morning has broken and all that.

And so the rattle of rain on the tarp doesn't really  
make me count my blessings, the stray drops

beading my borrowed rain pants don't bring  
me bliss, the fact of fewer mosquitoes

than yesterday does not make my heart leap up.  
But I know this: one day I must learn

to give up for good on getting dry,  
to love the hiss of water falling into water,

the gray lake meeting the gray rain,  
so little between them, our slender place

between the great sky and the stones.  
Hold tight, I tell my heart, here we go.<sup>22</sup>

Here the epigraph from Gregory Wolfe—spoken partly but not entirely in jest—is a gesture in defiance of the many who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” (Wolfe is the editor of the influential journal *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, and conservative but not rigid himself.) Some defenders of the “religious” like Lillian Daniel have gone

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<sup>22</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 54.

further, mocking the merely spiritual for “finding God in sunsets” while they sleep in or go hiking instead of dutifully trudging to church.<sup>23</sup> I find myself wishing to defy both categories; like a good Mennonite (at least of the rebel sort) I want to be neither “religious” nor “spiritual,” neither Catholic nor Protestant. I’m not even sure I want to be a good Mennonite, some days.

So the poem is one more effort at working out what I might want to be through metaphor. But the process was not rational nor even particularly introspective. As I wrote the images in my notebook, they seemed not the work of my “imagination,” nor the product of my ego defining its identity one more time. They were particular things present in the place and time where the poem came into being (I almost wrote “simply,” but that isn’t right). It had been a damp, tiring day out on the water, but as I wrote, the canoes had been safely secured, the tents set up on our island campsite, we scattered for a brief time to quiet ourselves and scribble in our damp notebooks before it came time to think about food and rest. What might it signify to be mostly dry and nearly warm among so much water, above and below and on all sides, held up for now by the rough rocks and fallen trunks on which we sat? Could this moment hold some emblem for the larger realities of our lives, so small and frail among the trees and rocks and lakes of this world, the low and damp sky above? The poem reaches toward some kind of abandonment, some kind of release, but to write such words at the end of a page, and to trust them as the end of the poem, is not to have a clear sense of what they might “mean” in prose, except that both “religious” and “spiritual” seem inadequate terms in those moments when we find ourselves most deeply contemplating what our place in the world might actually be.

One crucial form of defiance for theopoets is resistance to spurious clarity, to “explanations” that reduce mystery to something lesser, something solvable through ingenuity and effort, a jigsaw puzzle or a crossword. In this vein, Mary Szybist’s beautiful book of poems *Incarnadine*<sup>24</sup> takes its epigraph from Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*:<sup>25</sup> “The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality

<sup>23</sup> See Lillian Daniel, “Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me,” [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), September 13, 2011, accessed December 14, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine: Poems* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1952).

they should be an object of contemplation.” This maxim can be fruitfully applied in many circumstances, and to many sorts of mysteries.

Years ago I developed the habit of writing in meetings of a certain sort: readings crowded enough that I can scrawl and not be inconspicuous, somewhat boring lectures, and of course faculty meetings, which seem designed to inflict maximum psychic stress upon those with short attention spans and little tolerance for earnest academic discourse. Measures such as this poem, which I hope and trust runs its details through a fine enough sieve to avoid horrifying my good colleagues too much, sometimes seem the only way to preserve my psychic equilibrium and my role as quirky but tolerated member of the community.

#### NOTES FROM THE FACULTY MEETING

After eight years of bounty, the cow has dried up.

Behind the great man the shield icon pulsed, patient as a heart.

Like seeds, some ideas appear whole and undamaged  
but will never sprout.

Any form of motion draws the eye.

So far, every page of this yellow pad has torn ragged.

This troubles me more than it should.

I vowed to hold my breath until I heard a concrete noun.

Does “things” count? “Students?” “Projections?”

My attempt at narrative, jumbled already, was interrupted  
by the need to applaud.

The phrase “difficult challenge” was not followed

by showers of gold.

“Forming a task force” did not lead to “pursue the Great One.”

Most students believe they’re more honest than most students.

After a national search, we hired Randy’s brother.<sup>26</sup>

In the title poem “Somewhere Near Defiance,” I tried to address the broader world, and the ongoing, often distant violence of American culture. What does it mean for a middle-class white guy in a small, quiet, safe town to attempt to live with some measure of resistance? What use might words and poems be? What else do we have?

#### SOMEWHERE NEAR DEFIANCE

*It’s late but everything comes next*

—Naomi Shihab Nye, “Jerusalem”

1.

I live near Defiance, a white name pressed on an old place.  
Mad Anthony Wayne’s soldiers broke down the orchards

when the battle was theirs, and built a fort  
where the Auglaize and Maumee Rivers meet.

Water will answer anything, the moon, the wind,  
the mud. The rivers mingle and move on.

2.

Once I drove my little car right into the heart of the empire,  
huddled with my friends to plot and complain. All over town

the poets and other malcontents were hiding in the open,  
vowing to split the rocks and terrify the despots.

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<sup>26</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 76.



In the coffeehouse we tallied our losses and wondered how  
to subvert the lyric *I* until the hot waitress grabbed the mike

to say that racism wasn't over yet. We clapped for her,  
then wandered toward the Capitol, launched some ragged

words to each other and the wind. All right, you can  
have *shock*, we told the adversary, but *awe* belongs to us.

3.

Walt Whitman thought his poems might stop the war.  
When they did not he moved to Washington, took a day job

so he could go to the field hospitals, read to the wounded,  
write letters for men with no arms or eyes. *I have been hurt*

*but am mending well. Do not weep, I will find you one day.*  
I walked around for days, found no field hospitals,

lots of monuments. I passed the suited and booted,  
shaggy and lame, proud and weary, and it seemed

that each of us carried a wound we were trying to hide.

4.

Meanwhile the drone pilots turn their Hellfires loose  
from dark rooms in the suburbs, buy a 6-pack on the way home.

1200 veterans of the last good war die each day,  
and the stools at the VFW stand like puzzled mushrooms.

5.

These days I wake up grateful that my heavy dreams are gone.  
I snag the zipper of my coat, pull it free, and walk off

puzzling over slides and words and stratagems. Then I step  
into a room and see a row of faces, hopeful and new

as yellow apples hanging in the orchards of Defiance.

6.

The morning came brilliant to my quiet town,  
sun in the junipers, a robin on the wire.

Nothing that I do matters to the earth or the sky.

But I've stalled around too long—it's time for declarations,  
time for floods. Time to put down the *Toledo Blade*

and take a very long walk. Time to say peace on terror,  
peace on drugs, peace on Defiance.

Peace on Mad Anthony and his soldiers—gone so quiet now—  
and the warriors they fought, and the fruit trees they tore.

The Auglaize and the Maumee join and drift on,  
exchanging sticks and soil and bits of news.

We are in the earth already, and the earth in us.

Even from Defiance, nothing's more than half a world away.<sup>27</sup>

### **Desire**

As Robert Hass puts it in his lovely "Meditation at Lagunitas," "Longing, we say, because desire is full / of endless distances."<sup>28</sup> Desire wells up from the sense of incompleteness, separation, distance from the Beloved. We are like reed flutes, Rumi says, plucked from the reed-bed of primal presence, pulled away to live our separate lives, pierced and polished so that at least we can

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<sup>27</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 3-5.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Hass, *Praise* (New York: Ecco, 1979), 4.

sing.<sup>29</sup> Music seems especially closely connected to desire, of all sorts. We have plenty of church songs about that longing, about crossing the river, marching to Zion, flying away. But there many other, worldly songs speak of other longings, secular, sexual, and yet somehow perhaps not entirely different in their longing for transformation.

One such is “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” William Butler Yeats’s version of an Irish folktale.

I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor  
I went to blow the fire a-flame,  
But something rustled on the floor,  
And someone called me by my name:  
It had become a glimmering girl  
With apple blossom in her hair  
Who called me by my name and ran  
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done,

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<sup>29</sup> *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 17-18.

The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.<sup>30</sup>

I first read this poem forty-some years ago, in a red *Selected Poems* that is still on my shelf, the spine faded to pink now. I was a second-year student at Goshen College, just back from a self-assigned winter sabbatical in Hawaii, and we read a lot of Yeats in that summer class, taught by the poet and brilliant crank Nick Lindsay. I found much to admire in Yeats, but while his later poems are undoubtedly more substantial and “serious,” the early poems like this one, misty and sentimental as they seem next to his harder-edged late work, have something all their own. What are we to think about old Aengus, who spends his life chasing the glimmering girl he saw only once? Who is this magical girl, who changed from a little silver trout when his back was turned, called him by his name, then “faded in the brightening air” as if to teach him a permanent lesson about attempting to catch and hold beauty? He was a fool, of course, pursuing the illusion of perfect love in the form of a woman, a spirit, a creature from another realm. What a waste of his time and energy and spirit, any good Mennonite would say, when he could have been following Jesus instead, cleaning up after floods and spreading the Gospel.

And yet some stubborn, disobedient part of me believes that he spent his life exactly rightly, that love and beauty are the only things worth pursuing and that only in women and in sexual delight are these things fully embodied, incarnated, made present. It almost doesn’t matter that he will never find her. No—it’s *necessary* that he never find her, never woo and win and wed her. Happily ever after is for hymns and fairy tales, not this sort of tale, which for all its fantastical trappings is unsparing when it comes to human realities. Sooner or later, desire always leads back to beauty. I don’t just mean the girl’s beauty, which we can assume but is more implied than described, except in her “glimmering.” The beauty of the poem is equally important, its rhythms and images and music, the way they dazzle and entrance and ensnare. Those last lines still nearly melt me down.

It finally occurred to me recently to look for musical settings of Yeats’s poem. Everything is on the web these days, and I quickly found several.

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<sup>30</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier, 1962), 22.

My favorite is Donovan's, recorded in the early 1970s—about the time I was discovering the poem—as part of a children's album called "H.M.S. Donovan," released only in England. What a song about erotic obsession is doing on a children's album I can't say. But I found some workable chords, and I've been playing the song on my 12-string every chance I get. Often I sing through the last, most luscious stanza, with those immeasurably resonant lines about the silver apples, the golden apples, and then sing them again . . . and then, before I finish, decide I haven't done it quite right, or at least that it's not time to let it be over, and go right back to the start and play it again. It's no real joy to arrive at the end, anyway. The pleasure is in the middle, in the music, in the longing. And Aengus is always in that magical space himself, old but still kicking, still certain that he'll find his beloved and then his life will be transformed by the accomplishment of his desire.

Longing, we say. Distances.

Mennonites pursue the Beloved Community and follow Jesus to quench that desire, to convince ourselves that our beautiful tradition will provide what we need. And yet. . . . When I visited Grebel I spoke at a noontime forum, and we got into an impassioned discussion of hymns and singing—how sometimes we are carried away by the beauty of the group sound, the communal harmony, and other times harmony does not suffice and we're left alienated and disaffected, perhaps by patriarchal language, perhaps by frighteningly bloody atonement theology. When even the community does not satisfy, what then?

What might a theopoet offer? Not a solution, not an answer, not a resolution. Desire, as Weil says of the other mysteries, is not to be solved but to be contemplated. Some years back, at a workshop in the Catskills, I wrote a little night poem:

#### SMALL NIGHT SONG FROM ONEONTA

It's good that the world has more beauty  
than it needs. It's good to walk into  
the smooth Catskill night and discover

that the night has no edges, no sympathy,  
no grievance against me, that any place I step  
will hold me firm, not like a lover,

not like a child. It's good to be a child,  
and then for years to be something else,  
and then something else. It's a hard world

but the rain is persistent, the deer  
are quiet and discreet, and for ages now  
the trees have known how to dream their way up.

A man with a pack on his shoulder  
saunters down the path below me, knowing  
the lights he sees ahead are burning for him<sup>31</sup>

Much later I decided to try to write a sung version of this poem. I kept almost all the images, but did a fair amount of rearranging and repeating to make it more singable. The ending changed the most, as I felt my way toward a kind of chantlike repetition and variation. The idea of the lights burning for the man at the end of the poem (who was walking toward a reception, though the poem does not say so directly) expanded to suggest more directly that somehow the world is fitted to us, as the light of the sun is fitted to the trees, that the world is both a hard place and a sustaining, even good one. The sung version floats off into this ending:

It's good to be a child in this hard world  
and the trees they know  
that the lights we see  
are burning for you  
and they're burning for me  
burning for you and for me  
burning for you and maybe for me . . .

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<sup>31</sup> Jeff Gundy, *Deerflies* (Cincinnati: WordTech Editions, 2004), 133. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

it's a hard world but it's good  
it's a hard world . . . <sup>32</sup>

I tinkered with the last sequence for a long while, trying to get it just right. (You have to imagine a descending but confident progression through A minor, G, and F, repeating from “trees they know” through “they’re burning for me,” then something more tentative and uncertain in the last lines.) I suppose that I felt desire, defiance, and doubt all tugging at me. So there’s “and *maybe* for me” the second time through that line. I never know for sure whether the song really ends on “it’s a hard world but it’s good” or just “it’s a hard world.” It depends on the day.

Still, here is a new song, even perhaps a beautiful song, born from both the communal embrace and the solitary ramble. Not old wine in new wineskins, but new wine. That is what sustains me: not just one more poem but many, from many voices, speaking in many tongues and from many scattered places, within the circle and without. My song, yes, but not only mine, offered to you and yours as well, not for always, not the last song, just one more to be added to the songs that carry our hope, our fear, our dreams, our terrors on into the darkness and the light that may come.

### NO PATH

*for Gordon Kaufman*

Kayak on the quarry: will you hug the shore, push straight across,  
waver or dawdle? No paths on the water. Almost November,

and the poison ivy is still green. The soft trap of sky closes  
all around. An artful little spray of leaves near the shore,

as though Martha Stewart were sitting in for God.  
*Give up all that Father stuff*, said Gordon, *look where it's got us*.

*And the Warrior — even worse*. The kayakers lift and dip  
their paddles, orange signals: this way for us. So much is offered,

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<sup>32</sup> Available online at <https://soundcloud.com/gundyj/8-little-night-song>.

so much goes begging, and still what we need evades us, or hides  
in plain sight. On the water, every way might be the right way.

God might be the Father and the Warrior and the lost leaves,  
the water and the bleached trunk, motion and stone,

lush twists of cloud and barking dog and wind,  
star upon star alert and invisible in every direction,

low moan in the blood, circle and drift in the bright cells,  
shadowy hum and whirl of electrons, fizz and buzz and shush

too small to name. No end, no opening, no tribe, no answer.  
Only this: kayak and paddlers, lift and dip,

breath and muscle above the chill water, below the soft sky.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 20.



# **The Not-So-Quiet in the Land: The Anabaptist Turn in Recent American Evangelical Historiography**

*Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas*

David R. Swartz. *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; Brantley W. Gasaway. *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2014; Molly Worthen. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014.

In the historiography of North American Anabaptism, evangelicalism typically functions in one of two ways. Some Mennonite-produced analyses have depicted evangelicalism as a threat to Anabaptist distinctives, infiltrating and infecting thought and practice on peace, simple living, and the gathered church—a so-called declension thesis.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, other scholarship—often produced by Anabaptist groups outside the denominational orbits of the (Old) Mennonite and the General Conference Mennonite churches—has envisioned evangelicalism as an ally to Anabaptist values. It argues that shared convictions have guided the two traditions toward mutual influence and fruitful dialogue—a kind of integration thesis.<sup>2</sup> Whether focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of scholarship in this historiographical trajectory include most of the essays in C. Norman Kraus, ed., *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979); Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987); Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996); and Calvin W. Redekop, *Leaving Anabaptism: From Evangelical Mennonite Brethren to Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The language of “integration thesis” is my own. Examples of scholarship in this historiographical trajectory include the essays by Sider, Michaelson, and Wenger in Kraus, *Anabaptism and Evangelicalism*; Nathan E. Yoder, “Mennonite Fundamentalism: Shaping

corruption or cordiality, though, these two divergent historiographical models share at least one conviction: Given evangelicalism's demographic and cultural dominance within North American Christianity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Anabaptist story cannot be told without some reference to this larger tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Yet for all the attention paid to evangelicalism by scholars of Anabaptism, scholars of evangelicalism have paid little to no attention to Anabaptists. Mennonites and Brethren in Christ rarely feature as actors in narratives of evangelical experience in America.<sup>4</sup> A variety of factors shapes this historiographical reality, including Anabaptists' own ambivalence about their status as evangelicals. Perhaps the most significant factor in the absence of Anabaptism in evangelical historiography is what historian Douglas A. Sweeney has termed the "jockey[ing] for historiographical position" among two factions of scholars that he terms the Reformed and Holiness schools of evangelical history.<sup>5</sup> The historiographical models proposed by these two schools have dominated the literature on evangelicalism as it has emerged over the last three decades. In effect, they have so determined the actors in histories of evangelicalism that related groups—including groups like Anabaptists that do not always claim the evangelical label yet nevertheless moved through the 20th century in related ways—have been excluded from

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an Identity for an American Context" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Notre Dame, 1999); Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer, eds., *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012); David R. Swartz, "American Anabaptists, the Evangelical Left, and the Search for a Third Way," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 37 (2014): 161-80; and Tim Erdel, "'Better Right Than Mennonite': From 'Egely Amish' to the Defenseless Mennonite Church to the Evangelical Mennonite Church to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (2015): 467-87.

<sup>3</sup> An assessment of evangelicalism in Mennonite historiography is Bruce L. Guenther, "Evangelicalism in Mennonite Historiography: The Decline of Anabaptism or a Path to Dynamic Ecumenism?" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 24 (2006): 35-54.

<sup>4</sup> Since the monographs under consideration in this review essay focus primarily on evangelicalism in the United States, my use of the terms "America" and "American" should be understood as referring to the United States. References to "North American" should be understood as referring both to the United States and Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, "The Essential Evangelicalism Dialectic: The Historiography of the Early Neo-Evangelical Movement and the Observer-Participant Dilemma," *Church History* 60 (1991): 70-84; quotation 71.

the narrative.

Even so, in recent years the prevailing models of evangelical historiography have proven too limiting. Several studies of post-World War II American evangelicalism published since 2012 exemplify the emergence of a new trajectory that moves beyond the “essential evangelical dialectic”<sup>6</sup> of the Reformed and Holiness schools. It constitutes an Anabaptist turn in recent evangelical historiography, as scholars have inserted Anabaptists as key figures in the history of American evangelicalism.

The three books under review—Swartz’s *Moral Minority*, Gasaway’s *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, and Worthen’s *Apostles of Reason*—represent the most significant contributions to this Anabaptist turn. This essay considers their treatment of Anabaptists as historical agents in the emergence and development of post-war evangelicalism. In doing so, it assesses the significance of their revisionist approach in reorienting the dominant models of evangelical historiography, and concludes with some reflections on the potential for this new paradigm.

### **Dominant Historiographies**

Before examining each book in detail, I must briefly consider the dominant evangelical historiographies, the Reformed school and the Holiness school.<sup>7</sup> Douglas Sweeney describes scholars in the Reformed school as narrating the history of North American evangelicalism as a story of intellectual and institutional leaders. Its studies are populated by Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and others who shaped conservative Christianity as ministers, theologians, and leaders of institutions like Westminster Theological Seminary and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).<sup>8</sup> Exemplified by Mark Noll, George Marsden, Joel Carpenter, and others,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This language belongs to Sweeney; see *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> In a way, the debate itself is now fairly dated. The contest between Reformed school scholars and Holiness school scholars for “control” of evangelical historiography raged most heatedly in the late 1980s and early ’90s. By 2000 the debate had largely waned, with the Reformed school emerging victorious. Still, the contest’s basic contours provide a conceptual framework for ongoing studies of the movement.

<sup>8</sup> Sweeney, 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Studies in the Reformed camp include, but are by no means limited to, George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press,

the Reformed school frames evangelicalism primarily as an “intellectual religious movement” for which “the core issue . . . was ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the Holiness school—typified by Donald Dayton and the late Timothy Smith—narrates evangelical history from the perspective of holiness, Pentecostal, and charismatic groups. Scholars in this school argue that the roots of modern evangelicalism lie not in the bourgeois ivory tower of Westminster Seminary or NAE convention halls but in the working-class cultures of rural camp meetings and urban revivals, contexts that nurtured progressive sentiments like abolitionism, women’s suffrage, and social reform.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the Holiness school seeks to construct a more populist vision of evangelicalism—a “people’s history” to replace the prevailing elitist history approach,” as Sweeney describes it.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these diverging trajectories and disparate casts of characters, however, both schools tend to agree on at least one point: Since the mid-20th century, evangelicalism as a distinct movement has become increasingly difficult to define. The new or neo-evangelicalism of the post-World War II era is a denominationally and confessionally diverse coalition, including in its ranks fundamentalists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Mennonites, and others.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have pointed to this diversity as an explanation for evangelicalism’s increasingly open ideological posture in the last half of the century.

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2006); Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); and Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Jacobsen, “Re-visioning Evangelical Theology,” *Reformed Journal* 35 (1985): 18, quoted in Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Sweeney, 73–76. Studies in the Holiness camp include, but are not limited to, Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957), and Donald W. Dayton, *Recovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Sweeney, 74.

<sup>13</sup> For primary source documents detailing the institutionalization of “neo-evangelicalism” in the years during and after World War II, see Joel A. Carpenter, ed., *A New Evangelical Coalition: Early Documents of the National Association of Evangelicals* (New York: Garland, 1988). For a listing of early members of the NAE, see James DeForrest Murch, *Cooperation without Compromise: A History of the National Association of Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 202–203.

At the same time, scholars have struggled to develop an appropriate framework for characterizing this evangelical heterogeneity. Smith, for instance, has used the metaphors of a mosaic and a kaleidoscope to explain the “diversity of our [evangelical] histories, our organizational structures, and our doctrinal emphases.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Marsden has quipped that “by 1960 one might classify as ‘evangelical’ anyone who identified with Billy Graham,”<sup>15</sup> while also claiming that by the 1970s the movement had fragmented to the extent that “no one—not even Billy Graham—could claim to stand at the center” of it.<sup>16</sup>

Such unsettled historiographical terrain naturally raises a plethora of questions for scholars of American religious history. What happened to the neo-evangelicalism of mid-20th century America to so fragment it? In light of such fragmentation, how can we explain the seemingly unified rise of the Christian Right in the late 1970s and ’80s? More fundamentally, can we even answer such questions about the nature of American religion through the lens of evangelicalism? Has the concept itself—notoriously difficult to define in any coherent manner—lost its use as a heuristic device? How might a total reconceptualization of the category “evangelical” help us to better understand the function of born-again religion in 20th- and 21st-century history?

The books under review answer these questions—at least in part—by introducing Anabaptists like Mennonites and Brethren in Christ as characters in the drama of evangelical story.

### **Moral Minorities and Evangelical Progressives**

David Swartz and Brantley Gasaway focus on explaining the development of evangelicalism after 1960: What happened to the project of transdenominational “cooperation without compromise” amid the tumult of the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, anti-Vietnam protests,

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy L. Smith, “The Evangelical Kaleidoscope and the Call to Christian Unity,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 15 (1986): 125.

<sup>15</sup> George M. Marsden, “Preachers of Paradox: The Religious New Right in Historical Perspective,” in *Religion and America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age*, ed. Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 156.

<sup>16</sup> George M. Marsden, “Unity and Diversity in the Evangelical Resurgence,” in *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America 1935–1985*, ed. David W. Lotz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 71.

nuclear proliferation, and the culture wars? Earlier scholarship viewed the public emergence of the Christian Right as the logical outcome of a culturally engaged evangelical resurgence and as a conservative backlash against a secular counterculture revolution. But Swartz and Gasaway chart a lesser-known but equally significant development: the rise of a progressive evangelicalism, often called the Evangelical Left.

Both scholars root this progressive trajectory in the World War II-era theological and ethical work of Carl F. H. Henry, architect of a resurgent neo-evangelicalism. In such books as *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947), Henry exhorted his co-religionists to abandon their political quietism, engage the surrounding culture, and assume a greater role in the public square. Though rooting progressive evangelicalism in Henry's Reformed theology, neither Swartz nor Gasaway limit their narratives to Presbyterian or Baptist leaders or to the institutions privileged by the Reformed school. In *Moral Minority*, Swartz delineates the historical trajectory of progressive evangelicalism by explaining that "the path [of neo-evangelicalism] out of fundamentalist exile took many directions" (24).

This approach enables Swartz to profile the individuals and groups from varied denominational, theological, and doctrinal backgrounds that shaped the nascent movement. Each chapter of *Moral Minority* offers a biographical sketch of a significant figure in the Evangelical Left, tying each individual to a key theme for progressives: *The Other Side* publisher John Alexander and civil rights activism; *Sojourners'* Jim Wallis and anti-war protest; Oregon senator Mark Hatfield and electoral politics; communitarian Sharon Gallagher and gender equality; Latin American theologian Samuel Escobar and the "Third World" critique of the capitalist, militarist West; and Reformed scholar Richard Mouw and the cultural mandate.

Of particular relevance to the present review is Swartz's chapter on Brethren in Christ professor and theologian Ronald J. Sider and the influential call to simple living, anti-materialism, and economic justice issued to evangelicals by Anabaptist-Mennonites. Placing Sider's contributions in historical and theological context, Swartz describes how "the quiet in the land" moved beyond their ethnic enclaves in the 1950s, "increasingly identifying with evangelicalism" and "prodding [that tradition] toward prophetic social engagement" (153). He describes in detail Sider's 1977 book *Rich Christians*

in *an Age of Hunger*, which offered a scathing moral indictment of Western affluence and indifference to injustice, and introduced the language of sin to broader societal debates about global poverty. Swartz concludes that, with this book, Sider offered “Anabaptism’s most influential contribution to evangelicalism in the postwar era” (156). Swartz also highlights other Anabaptist texts that induced evangelical readers toward simplicity and justice, especially Mennonite Central Committee volunteer Doris Longacre’s 1976 “thrifty yet exotic cookbook” *More With Less* (160-63, quotation 160). In a separate chapter, he devotes attention to Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s provocative yet popular *The Politics of Jesus* (204-206). Thus, without overstating their influence, Swartz establishes convincingly the place of Anabaptists in the Evangelical Left of the 1960s and ’70s.

One key example of their significance was Sider’s leadership role in the 1973 Thanksgiving Workshop of Evangelical Social Concern, held in Chicago. This meeting drew together the somewhat disparate strands of progressive evangelical sentiment for the signing of the Chicago Declaration, a manifesto against racism, sexism, economic injustice, and militarism. For Swartz, this gathering was the high-water mark of the Evangelical Left, occurring at a time before the rise of Jerry Falwell when evangelicalism’s rightward turn “was anything but assured” (218). But in subsequent years, he explains, this “progressive united front” collapsed. Identity politics fragmented the fragile coalition. African-Americans rejected the movement’s sustained racial inequalities. Evangelical feminists chafed against the preponderance of male leadership and felt powerless despite numerous attempts to gain a greater voice within the movement. Theological clashes between the establishment-focused Calvinists and countercultural Anabaptists damaged the fragile unity. Moreover, evangelical progressives’ fusion of conservative theology and social action made them ideological orphans in the polarized political arena of the late ’70s. Their “consistently pro-life” rhetoric isolated them from Democrats’ hardening pro-choice orthodoxy, while their opposition to war and their liberal attitudes toward economics and foreign policy distanced them from Republicans. In this vacuum, the Christian Right captured the evangelical political imagination. As a result, Swartz concludes, “progressive evangelicals . . . were left behind by both the left and the right” because of their inability to “fit [into] an evolving two-party political system” (214).



Yet these non-Right evangelicals did not disappear. In *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, Brantley Gasaway explains the animating ideas and inducements that sustained the minority movement during Reagan-era conservatism and ideological culture wars. Rooting his analysis in the historical trajectory described by Swartz, Gasaway explains progressive evangelicals' motivating "public theology." He utilizes the activities and resources of three prominent progressive evangelical institutions—Wallis's *Sojourners*, Alexander's *The Other Side*, and Sider's Evangelicals for Social Action—as lenses through which to assess this philosophy. Despite differences in style and substance, these three institutions and their figurehead leaders shared a "set of theological convictions about public affairs and politics that shaped their efforts to promote a just society" (54). Arguing that all people have both individual rights and collective or communal responsibilities that deserve equal protection, progressive evangelicals called Christians to embrace a biblical understanding of social justice rooted in a shared commitment to the common good and undergirded by a desire to ensure equal opportunities through the equitable distribution of socioeconomic resources. Armed with this "public theology of community," progressive evangelicals engaged the public sphere.

In six successive thematic chapters, Gasaway describes how progressive evangelicals applied this public theology to different issues: racism, sexism, abortion, gay rights, poverty, and nationalism and militarism. Importantly, he shows that progressive evangelicals were hardly uniform in their response to these issues. Despite a shared public theology, they adopted varied biblical interpretations and political priorities that ultimately produced divergent, sometimes contrasting responses. Thus, Gasaway can describe progressive evangelicalism as a "coherent yet complex religious movement" (15) with a "dynamic, multivocal nature" (16)—conclusions that further reinforce the diversity of evangelicalism in the last half of the 20th century.

Like Swartz, Gasaway acknowledges that Anabaptism contributed an important expression to this manifold movement. Even so, he devotes limited attention to analyzing this influence. He describes Sider as a "lifelong Anabaptist" (68) and modestly highlights the shaping force of Anabaptist theology on Wallis's early work (55). He also acknowledges the influence of John Howard Yoder on Sider and Wallis, both of whom "endorsed



[Yoder's] . . . Anabaptist view of the church as a countercultural, alternative community—a visible witness to God's just kingdom" (68). Gasaway also makes brief references to Anabaptism in discussing progressive evangelicals' rhetoric on peace, nationalism, and militarism (238, 266). Even so, given the book's preoccupation with ideas and its privileging of Sider as a key voice within the progressive evangelical movement, the author could have devoted significantly more attention to a genealogy of Anabaptist theological influence. After all, Sider self-consciously drew on his Anabaptist "heritage" in his writing and speaking, even as he framed his arguments in evangelical language.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, both books significantly advance scholarship on evangelicalism after 1960, and help to make sense of the fragmentation and diversification of those claiming the evangelical label. Yet neither text delves deeply into the more fundamental problem: the contested nature of the term "evangelical."

### **Re-mapping the Evangelical Mind**

At first blush, Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason* may seem to present the trappings of a conventional history of evangelicalism in the Reformed school tradition. She centralizes familiar historical actors, including Carl F. H. Henry, Harold Ockenga, Billy Graham, and Francis Schaeffer. They function in familiar institutions such as the NAE, *Christianity Today*, and Fuller Seminary, and they express their evangelical activism in familiar projects—evangelistic crusades, the church growth movement, and theological education, among others. Yet Worthen's monograph is anything but conventional. She orients familiar material around a fresh, compelling argument. Acknowledging evangelicalism's historical roots in 17th-century Pietism and Puritanism as well as 18th- and 19th-century revivalism and moral reform movements, Worthen ultimately describes evangelicalism

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Ronald J. Sider, "Evangelicalism and the Mennonite Tradition," in *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. C. Norman Kraus (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 149-168, and Ronald J. Sider, "On Writing Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 1 (1978): 35-40. For analysis of Sider's Anabaptist "heritage" in his work, see Swartz, "Re-Baptizing Evangelicalism: American Anabaptists and the 1970s Evangelical Left," in *The Activist Impulse*, 262-91, and Jeffrey McClain Jones, "Ronald Sider and Radical Political Theology" (Ph.D. Diss., Northwestern University, 1990).

neither doctrinally nor confessionally but as an intellectual tradition shaped by a set of questions about “the relationship of faith and experience to human reason” (11). She contends that evangelicalism’s attempts to make Enlightenment science compatible with pre-modern religion have produced a crisis of authority, an “ongoing . . . struggle to reconcile reason with revelation, heart with head, and private piety with the public square” (2).

Such a far-reaching reconceptualization of evangelicalism as a heuristic device problematizes conventional tellings of evangelical history, creating an opening through which Worthen can introduce those “communities on the fringes of evangelicalism’s ‘mainstream’ that might contest the term altogether,” including Wesleyans and Anabaptists (5). Thus she can effectively synthesize both evangelical histories by Marsden, Carpenter, Dayton, Barry Hankins, Steven Miller, and others with narratives offered by Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars such as Nathan Yoder, Perry Bush, and Steve Nolt to achieve the interpretive triumph that is *Apostles of Reason*.

The first part of Worthen’s book considers the resurgence of neo-evangelicalism, its ostensibly Reformed obsession with defending biblical inerrancy, and its assertion of a Christian worldview as the cornerstone of Western civilization. The second part considers the transforming influence of anthropology on evangelical missionary activity, as well as the rise of the charismatic movement as an evangelical leaven in High Church liturgy. Part three contends that the culture wars of the late 20th century grew out of an internal conflict within evangelicalism between left-leaning progressive social activists and conservatives, like Francis Schaeffer, who sought to re-assert inerrancy and worldview ideology amid convulsions within the larger culture.

Anabaptists loom large in this narrative. In the 1940s and ’50s, as the NAE emerged under the leadership of Henry and Ockenga, Mennonite church historian Harold Bender posited a vision of evangelical Anabaptism as a solution to the identity crisis and intellectual turmoil within his own religious community. The argument bolstered Mennonites’ self-confidence, and armed them with a historical tradition by which they could challenge the patriotic, individualistic neo-evangelical consensus (42-45). In subsequent decades, Bender’s student John Howard Yoder confronted evangelicals with sustained critiques of their culturally relativistic approach to mission

(133) as well as their tacit endorsement of just war and Niebuhrian realism (196-97). Yet Yoder also used the first-person plural in his voluminous correspondence with evangelical leaders, considering himself (in Worthen's words) not so much "an outside commentator but a firsthand participant" (78) in the evangelical project. Moreover, Ron Sider drew on his experiences teaching and living at a Brethren in Christ college in a poor section of urban Philadelphia to compose *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, which shaped late 20th-century evangelical thinking on justice (183). These Anabaptist leaders, Worthen convincingly shows, cultivated an evangelical insider status precisely because they believed their traditions had something to gain by saving evangelicals from civil religion.

With *Apostles of Reason*, Worthen offers a gripping historical account, written in lucid prose and peppered with wit. The book constitutes the most definitive account to date of the evangelical mind.

### **Concluding Reflections**

These studies by Swartz, Gasaway, and Worthen clearly demonstrate the emergence of a new historiographical trajectory within the study of evangelicalism—a trajectory bound neither to the Reformed nor Holiness school approaches and distinguished, at least in part, by its insertion of Anabaptists into the standard narratives of evangelical resurgence. The studies portray Mennonite and Brethren in Christ people as more than pacifist gadflies on the margins of evangelical institutions; indeed, Anabaptists influenced and participated in evangelical activities in key ways throughout the 20th century, often by claiming an evangelical identity while simultaneously critiquing evangelical excess.

This narrative is not entirely new; Mennonite scholars have tracked the interactions between evangelicalism and Anabaptism for decades.<sup>18</sup> Still, it signals a decisive change within the historiography of evangelicalism. These studies signal the emergence of a third historiographical trajectory, an Anabaptist school that tells the story of evangelical history from the perspectives of those who may or may not claim that religious label but who undoubtedly converged with and diverged from the neo-evangelical consensus after 1945. What might a third way of narrating evangelical

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<sup>18</sup> See footnotes 1 and 2.

history contribute to an already crowded historiography?

First, such an approach might centralize the voices and perspectives of African American and Latino/a Anabaptists—groups often neglected in studies of both evangelicalism and Anabaptism. Some scholars, particularly historian Felipe Hinojosa, have already advanced the discourse by examining Mennonite-evangelical intersections through the experiences of Latino/as in the American Southwest. Hinojosa has shown that late 20th-century Latino/a Mennonites saw themselves as *evangélicos*, a position that differentiated them from many of their white coreligionists. While whites evinced ambivalence toward the evangelical label, Latino/as embraced it.<sup>19</sup> Future scholars may draw similar claims about black Mennonites. The largest congregation in Mennonite Church USA—Calvary Community Church in Hampton, Virginia—is a megachurch with 2,200 mostly African American members; this reality certainly suggests the confluence of both Anabaptist and evangelical themes. By incorporating blacks and Latino/as as key actors, an “Anabaptist school” of evangelical history could dramatically reconceptualize the study of both evangelicalism and Anabaptism, subfields that typically focus on white intellectuals and institutional leaders.

Second, an Anabaptist school might embrace a methodological approach that American religious historians call “lived religion.” Worthen offers a hint of what such an approach might look like: “. . . Yoder’s Anabaptist heritage emphasized the *personal habits* and *local community* through which God’s word *informed everyday life*. Discipleship, more than dogma, was the primary way to follow Christ” (76, emphasis added). If the Reformed school stresses ideas articulated by elites and the Holiness school focuses on cultural movements stirred by working-class religionists, the Anabaptist school ought to pay attention to everyday practices and habits of living.

In this sense, explaining the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ experience across the 20th century requires more than just attention to the intellectual work of Bender and Sider; it necessitates careful consideration of daily habits of discipleship, holiness, peacemaking, and separation. How has

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<sup>19</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014); Felipe Hinojosa, “Pool Tables are the Devil’s Playground: Mennonite Voluntary Service in South Texas, 1952-1968,” in Burkholder and Cramer, eds., *The Activist Impulse*, 237-61.

theology been discussed at the dinner table or “practiced in the kitchen,” to borrow a phrase from Swartz? What happened when Mennonite and Brethren in Christ teenagers and college students joined their friends at a Youth for Christ rally or an Inter-Varsity Bible study? How did Bible memorization, Christian radio, and attendance at the Brunk or Augsburgers crusades shape the lives of Mennonite farmers, housewives, and professionals? How did patterns of discipleship and community transform as Anabaptists moved from the farm to the suburbs and the cities? To what extent did terms of global service with Mennonite Central Committee transform the day-to-day experiences of those who returned to North America?

These questions point to narratives quite distinct from the intellectual and political histories offered by Worthen, Swartz, and Gasaway. Yet the questions might ultimately get us closer to the essence of evangelicalism. Like Anabaptists, Reformed and Holiness evangelicals also practice their faith in community, both locally and globally. To fully understand these born-again believers, scholars must move beyond doctrine and ideas to lived reality and everyday practices of religion.

The above suggestions chart one possible trajectory for the emerging Anabaptist school of evangelical history. Without doubt, Worthen, Swartz, and Gasaway have tapped a rich vein of historical inquiry—a vein that promises to yield not only new insights about evangelicalism and Anabaptism, but more importantly about the role of religion in American life in the 20th century.

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## Radicality in Mennonite Theology: Recent Contributions of Hans-Jürgen Goertz

*Jonathan R. Seiling*

Hans-Jürgen Goertz, the subject of the following interview, is well known to Anabaptist and Reformation historians, although his name is less recognized in the Mennonite theological arena. Now retired from a career as a social historian and professor, with the appearance of two recent theological books he has once again devoted himself to theology, his first love. Goertz began his studies in theology alongside English and philosophy at the University of Hamburg, and then transferred to Göttingen, where he completed his Th.D. in 1964, during roughly the same years when John Howard Yoder was studying in Basel. From 1963 to 1969 Goertz worked as a pastor in the Mennonite congregation in Hamburg-Altona, after which he began an academic fellowship at the ecumenical institute of the University of Heidelberg. During this period he worked intensively on the issue of modern pneumatology and published a study on the theocentrism of the Lutheran theologian Erich Schaefer.<sup>1</sup> He turned to social history in 1974, when he accepted a position at the Institute for Social and Economic History at the University of Hamburg, where he later became a full professor and remained until retirement in 2002. Among other honors, he has given invited guest lectures at the most distinguished universities in both the German-speaking world and the English-speaking world (Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge among the latter).

Since 1970 Goertz has served as editor of the *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter*, the annual scholarly journal of Anabaptist history and Mennonite studies in Germany, and has been the chief editor of the online revision and expansion of the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* ([www.mennlex.de](http://www.mennlex.de)). Although his professional commitments have centered on the university sphere in recent decades, his experience as a pastor and his concern for the self-awareness of the Mennonite tradition has kept him engaged in both student-

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Geist und Wirklichkeit: Eine Studie zur Pneumatologie Erich Schaefers* (Göttingen: 1980).

centered and congregationally-oriented events. In this way his expertise as a Mennonite scholar, of which there are few in Europe, continues to be called upon as a resource for Mennonite self-understanding.

Goertz has published some twenty monographs, with only a few available in English, most notably his overview of Anabaptist history and *Profiles of Radical Reformers*.<sup>2</sup> He is also renowned for his theoretical studies in history.<sup>3</sup> He was a pioneer in the field of radical Reformation studies, particularly in his emphasis on the social character of radical reform, which requires analysis beyond theological treatises. His most famous and debated contribution was the determinative concept of “anticlericalism,” which he sees as the Reformation era’s root impulse toward radical reform.<sup>4</sup>

In 1975 Goertz edited a volume of studies primarily from a new generation of Anabaptist scholars,<sup>5</sup> setting the course for a more critical reading of Anabaptist history by encouraging academics to engage the social history of radicality in the early Reformation.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, he played a major part in inciting the social-history orientation of “polygenesis” revisionism. He has also edited numerous volumes and published more than 70 scholarly articles. A full bibliography is available online.<sup>7</sup>

Goertz’s dissertation on inner and outer “order” (*Ordnung*) in the theology of Thomas Müntzer<sup>8</sup> initiated his leading role in the field of Reformation radicalism. He has remained a leading scholar on Müntzer. His

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Among others, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte: Zur Theorie historischer Referentialität* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Verlag, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to *The Anabaptists*, Goertz presents this thesis in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Antiklerikalismus und Reformation: Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1995), and in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “What a tangled and tenuous mess the clergy is!': Clerical Anticlericalism in the Reformation Period,” *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 499-519.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Umstrittenes Taufertum 1525-1975: Neue Forschungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> For Goertz’s definition of radicality, see the review of *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute* in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 386-388.

<sup>7</sup> [www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=zum-herausgeber](http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=zum-herausgeber), accessed January 20, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Innere und äußere Ordnung in der Theologie Thomas Müntzers*, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 2, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

recent collection of German essays, *Radikalität der Reformation* (2007),<sup>9</sup> spans topics ranging from Anabaptist hermeneutics and apocalypticism to social and political revolution and religious nonconformity.

After retiring as a social historian and professor, Goertz returned to contemporary theology as the main focus of his reflection and publications. His reflections in *Bruchstücke* [Fragments]<sup>10</sup> and his book on Yoder's theology<sup>11</sup> aim to engage a broad German Protestant readership, yet their content and the potential impact of his arguments and proposals should be of particular interest to Mennonites elsewhere. His theological writings would appeal to those with an affinity either to Gordon Kaufman, whose approach has clearly spurred Goertz's thinking, or to A. James Reimer, who also appears as a congenial dialogue partner for Goertz, especially as a critic of the theological basis for Yoderian ethics.

Most recently Goertz has published an updated edition of his biography of Thomas Müntzer, an important contribution to the current commemoration of the Reformation in Germany.<sup>12</sup> Radicality is a theme that unites the breadth of Goertz's theological interests and career-long contributions to Reformation studies broadly speaking. His latest work on Mennonite theology, from someone who presents a self-critical perspective as a Mennonite, encourages both Mennonites and mainstream Christian traditions to take social and theological radicality seriously.

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<sup>9</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Radikalität der Reformation: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 93, ed. Thomas Kaufmann and Volker Henning Drecoll (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute: Eine Rechenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). See book review in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (2015): 386-88.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *John Howard Yoder—Radikaler Pazifismus im Gespräch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). See book review in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 384-86.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionär am Ende der Zeiten. Eine Biographie* (Munich: Beck, 2015).



## **Theologian in Contradiction: An Interview with Hans-Jürgen Goertz on John Howard Yoder's Radical Pacifism**

*This interview was arranged in collaboration with Rev. Christoph Wiebe, pastor of Krefeld Mennonite Church in Germany, for the release of Goertz's new book, John Howard Yoder–Radikaler Pazifismus im Gespräch [Radical Pacifism in Dialogue] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). The original German version of the interview was published in Die Brücke 1 (2014): 30-35. —Editor*

**Q:** You have published a book on John Howard Yoder's peace theology<sup>1</sup> and dealt critically with his pacifism. What made you decide to take on this man, who is the poster child of Mennonite theologians?

**H-JG:** I can't think of a theologian who has attracted as much attention after his death, who has been written about in as many theses, dissertations, and essays as this Mennonite theologian, who held a teaching appointment at a Catholic university for more than twenty years, and who represented the peace witness in the spirit of Anabaptism in such an impressive manner. He did not merely repeat what the Anabaptists had said but provided a new language for the Anabaptist spirit in our time. His theology is original and fascinating, but also outlandish and in a certain way not at all convincing. That's what drew me to the subject.

**Q:** Who was Yoder for you?

**H-JG:** For me, Yoder was a self-contradictory and prickly figure. He would draw me in and push me away. To give an example, he gave a profound theological and ecclesiological meaning to dialogue with others. I found that emphasis convincing, and it saved me from turning away from my Mennonite heritage at the end of my theological studies in Göttingen. Yet I've

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<sup>1</sup> *John Howard Yoder–Radikaler Pazifismus im Gespräch* [Radical Pacifism in Dialogue] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

met few theologians who were as introverted and closed towards the other as Yoder. He was absolutely not open to real dialogue. He could snub or bypass other people's questions and objections. He seldom gave his interlocutors the feeling that he had changed his views as a result of a dialogue in which they had jointly developed a piece of the truth.

**Q:** Yoder played a role in Anabaptist research, in the ecumenical movement, and in the worldwide peace movement. Where does the true accent in his theology lie?

**H-JG:** It does not lie in one role or the other, but rather in his idiosyncratic combination of all three. It was not the case that he was initially concerned only with the dialogues between the Anabaptists and the Reformers. Simultaneously, he was also concerned with the questions that were then being discussed about unity among the divided churches. And, as a young American in Europe immediately after the war, he recognized that it was necessary to consider new approaches to the peace witness of his own church, and to take advantage of dialogue with theologians of other churches. Yoder's theology emerged from the "root chord"<sup>2</sup> of an Anabaptist commitment to the renewal of the Church, commitment to the unity of the Church, and a decisive witness for peace in the world. Yoder strummed this root chord repeatedly—until his final days.

**Q:** Was there anything new in that for the Mennonite churches and discussions of peace?

**H-JG:** Yoder was not the only voice crying in the wilderness. He was one of a number of young Mennonites who worked in the volunteer program of the Mennonite Central Committee in Europe and came together to form the so-called Concern Group. The "concern" of this group was to lead Mennonite churches in North America on a path of renewal, and there is no question that Yoder was the group's intellectual leader. With the root chord

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<sup>2</sup> "Root chord" [Ger. *Grundakkord*] is meant as an analogy to a musical chord comprising three notes (Anabaptist renewal, unity of the church, peace witness), which Yoder strummed/played as the basic theme of his thought.

I just mentioned, he broadened the Mennonites' centuries-long retreat into confessional separatism and wanted to open them to theological dialogues with other churches. The Anabaptists were thus depicted as committed co-Reformers rather than as deviants or marginal figures. The contemporary Mennonite churches were encouraged to become engaged in the roots of their own particular community in an effort to achieve unity among the churches. The task of being peacemakers was formulated such that it gained new relevance as a fundamental mission of every church. The cogency<sup>3</sup> [of this approach] was new.

**Q:** How were these ideas received—in Germany and in North America?

**H-JG:** They were received in different ways. In Germany, the young theologians among the Mennonites felt relieved. Finally, we were able to depart from the beaten tracks of confessional self-justification and once again develop our own theological reflection between the lecture halls and the often sparsely-attended Mennonite gatherings. The Anabaptist heritage had gained the capacity for dialogue, and this strengthened our resolve not only to carry the learned insights of Protestant theology to the congregations, but also to develop a theology that combined our acquired theological professionalism with the new inspirations emanating from Yoder and the entire Concern Group.

In North America, these new considerations initially were not taken too kindly. Yoder's theological teacher and his colleagues saw themselves as being challenged by the reforming zeal of their students. Harold S. Bender, who had heavily shaped the theological scene with his *Anabaptist Vision*<sup>4</sup> since the 1940s, especially felt the challenge. With its criticism, the Concern Group repeated in their home community the drama that the Grebel circle had staged in Zurich with Zwingli. In this way Bender and his colleagues were put in the same position as Zwingli or Luther; they were accused of not being consistent and not sufficiently pushing forward the renewal of Mennonite churches with the Anabaptist Vision. The Concern Group

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<sup>3</sup> That is, the cogency of combining the notes of the root chord.

<sup>4</sup> Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (1944): 3-24; and *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67-88.

criticized the elders of their national denomination for not feeling obliged to recognize the fundamentally congregationalist nature of Anabaptist community formation. This accusation deeply affected Bender.

**Q:** Were there other voices in North America critical of the theological intentions of the young reformers?

**H-JG:** Yes. There were, above all, J. Lawrence Burkholder and Gordon D. Kaufman. They had turned against the separatism of the old communities, but they considered Yoder's efforts to place the church in the center of his theological reflections, and to redefine the contrast between church and world, to be too narrow and irresponsible with respect to the concerns of society. Other voices arose out of the fact that Yoder began speaking of the political dimension of the church and focusing his attention on "the politics of Jesus" as the center of his peace theology, as in the title of his later, now famous, book.<sup>5</sup> But that was precisely what was attractive to younger scholars, and it set in motion an intensive study of Yoder's complete works after his death. Yoder also experienced criticism from theologians of other church traditions. Conversely, some were strongly influenced by him.

**Q:** Yoder put the church at the front of his considerations. Was that incidental, or was ecclesiology the center of his theology?

**H-JG:** Yes, ecclesiology belongs at the center of his theology. The early Anabaptists desired a different church than the Reformers had in mind: free from authoritarian and social constraints, not only inwardly free but free in all its forms. They felt obligated to discipleship alone. In this way Yoder took up an important aspect of the Anabaptist Vision, but tied it more closely to the church than Bender had done. Efforts to promote the unity of the churches were supposed to unfold freely, guided by God and the community of believers who were reconciled to each other. Thus he developed "the free church ecumenical style."<sup>6</sup> The peace testimony, which is set over against the

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<sup>5</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> This is the title of an essay published in John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays*

peace-less “world,” is the message of peace that has already been achieved in the church. The church is itself, as Yoder says, the social form of the Gospel in this world.

**Q:** It is not new to say that salvation is proclaimed in the church. What is at stake here for Yoder?

**H-JG:** For Yoder, it was about what God did for people to create the new reality that has already been established in this world and that one day will be completed with Christ's return. This is the church, which Jesus ostensibly had already gathered around himself in his lifetime and which established itself as a new “society” in the world. This church *is* the message in what it embodies and represents, because it exemplifies how God conceives of society for all humans. The church is now, as Yoder says, the “messianic community.” Or, once again: The church is salvation itself—a very different emphasis than is common in Protestant theology. In contrast, Yoder could say pointedly that the church is not a preaching agency or factory, and that preachers, pastors, and missionaries are not agents of the Word.

**Q:** Which church does Yoder mean: the real, existing one with its mistakes and deficits, or the one that is intended by God?

**H-JG:** Yoder mentions that the Church can fall away from its original purpose. By this he refers primarily to state or national churches that have blurred all boundaries between church and state and society since Christianity became a state religion in the 4th-century CE. While the original church was formed by those who answered the call of Jesus to discipleship, the church lost its contours and became anything but the new “society” according to which God wanted to shape the further development of human society. And the “world” lost the example that was intended for its benefit and for helping put it on the right path.

**Q:** And what about the errors and defects that are not absent in the visible church of Christ? Do they play no role?

**H-JG:** They still play a role, but they no longer set the tone. As someone once said, Yoder placed the burden of failure on individual church members who had fallen into disobedience. To this degree the church (composed of individuals) is vulnerable, but as the “messianic community” it cannot be destroyed. The kingdom of God will be brought to completion through it. As a community that already is peaceful and reconciled, it has rules at its disposal to recall to the right path members who have fallen into disobedience, and to make peace with the community, by using the force of the ban according to the rule of Christ (Matthew 18). Here again, it becomes clear how fully the church shapes those who have joined it. It coaches them in their faith, behavior, and actions. As Yoder says, it determines their “way of life.” It is not the individual who comprises the congregation’s existence; it is the congregation that helps the individual exist in obedience to God.

**Q:** Didn’t Yoder expect too much of the church in this way?

**H-JG:** Yes, and that is my critique of Yoder. But before I rehearse that criticism, three issues need to be mentioned that add to the understanding of this ecclesiology. First, in his study of the dialogues between the Anabaptists and the Reformers, Yoder encountered the importance that dialogue had for the congregation. To put it briefly, in dialogue about the revelation of God in Scripture, a congregation arises and is constantly re-created in new ways. The church is not, as the Reformers called it, a “*creatura verbi*,” but actually a sympathetic hermeneutic. It is not monological-authoritarian, but dialogical-communal. In the 1960s, this was modern and refreshing.

Second, Yoder brought the earthly Jesus into the discussion of ethics and ecclesiology, which is particularly evident in his book *The Politics of Jesus*, published in 1972 in English and in German in 1981. The church’s behavior and actions must be guided by what Jesus said and did. He becomes the norm of Christian ethics. Thus, the ethics of peace is rooted in the heart of the Gospel, and every theology is a peace theology. Third, Yoder appropriated from his teacher, Oscar Cullmann, a way of speaking about the “kingdom of Christ,” and thus represented the church in a universal-cosmological framework. It is the reign of Christ over the church and the world that, on the one hand, marks the difference between the church and

the world but, on the other hand, their connectedness, because Christ is also Lord over the "world." Therefore, Christians cannot remain indifferent to the world. Whatever aligns with the logic or structure inscribed in creation ("the grain of the universe"), with nonviolence in the world, is to be welcomed and supported. The church exists and acts in this cosmically extensive framework of the "transformation" of the world.

**Q:** Your book undertakes a fundamental critique of Yoder's theology. Please explain.

**H-JG:** Initially, I present the "root chord" that constitutes Yoder's theology, but then I also discuss how his thought continued to develop after *The Politics of Jesus*. For example, Yoder enlivened the discussion of just war to address the problems of conflict management that face church and society, and dealt with the Jewish-Christian dialogue and Catholic liberation theology. But the root chord of his theological beginnings fundamentally did not change much. My criticism can be summarized in three points.

The first point relates to Yoder's capacity for dialogue. Indeed, I have noticed in examining his dialogues with those who thought differently that he often pushed his interlocutor in a direction that had to have felt coercive to that person, to the extent that the interlocutor would abandon his own terminology or rephrase his questions before dialogue could be possible. This is clearest in the dialogue about the unity of the church, when Yoder could recognize an advance in unity efforts only if his interlocutors were willing to abandon their own church traditions and begin looking for unity in a "free church ecumenical style." In doing so, he contradicted the theological quality that he seemed to think was appropriate for dialogue. He also developed his theory of dialogue from examples that assumed that the parties involved were seeking the truth of the same confession that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church and the world. It was therefore not a dialogue about the truth of the Gospel, free of preconditions. That skeptics, unbelievers, and atheists can contribute to the knowledge of this truth does not come into play in Yoder's construction of dialogue. For him, we have to deal with amputated dialogues.

Second, something similar can be observed when Yoder discussed the issue of the peace imperative for the church. It was out of the question that

there is any alternative. The task of peace was so closely connected with his understanding of the church that one can only think correctly about war and peace if one is shaped by the church, in which not only is salvation proclaimed but which is salvation itself. Here again, Yoder contradicted his own brilliantly formulated insight that not only should the actions of Christians be peaceful, but also that their thinking should take place without coercion and nonviolently, because this is when the truth of God reveals itself.

And third, for Yoder it is an unshakable fact that the pacifism (nonviolence) he represented is not really an ethical requirement, to be understood as a human response to salvation in Jesus Christ, but an “inner logic of the cosmos” or a “structure of the universe” (“the grain of the universe”) that is inscribed in the creation of the world and will irresistibly prevail even if through suffering. This is not an article of faith; it is a fact to be understood ontologically, a feature of the order of being. Although it exists and produces its effects independently of people, it is nevertheless found in their social relations with each other. Anyone working with the grain of the universe contributes to the success of nonviolence. Everyone is subject to this development. In modern times, such an ontology must be understood as a notion by which a minority exercises coercive power over the whole of humanity. But this contradicts the non-coercive nature of pacifism as Yoder otherwise understood it.

**Q:** Yoder acted in sexually abusive ways towards women and had to answer for it in a disciplinary process in his church. Does this confirm your criticisms of the theological contradictions in his work?

**H-JG:** Yes, I suppose it does. A theologically-loaded ethic equated with the gospel—“social ethics as gospel”—stands in contradiction to civil misconduct. But I am in no position to make judgments about this affair, because I know only some of the statements published on it. I have some sympathy for those who think there must be a separation between teaching and life.

**Q:** Didn't Yoder recommend precisely against separating life and teaching from each other?



**H-JG:** Yes. He intended, for example, that the function of salvation in the church's life would be to make salvation visible to the whole world. Yoder seemed to view this ecclesial visibility as the essence of the Gospel, and that the act of making the Gospel visible was a necessary consequence of its authenticity, an effect inseparable from the presence of the Gospel itself. He also theologically reflected on and justified his behavior towards women; for instance, he claimed that he had not crossed the boundary of "coital sexual intimacy." One can assume that he imagined himself in a messianic order of human relations, characterized by human closeness and loving relationships between the sexes in a way not expected in "the old aeon." Such an interpretation would correspond to the observed ontologization of ecclesiology in social relationships.

**Q:** So, were doctrine and life not in unison with each other in a way that was plausible for Yoder?

**H-JG:** Yes, but the ontologization of social relationships and practices in the church had plunged him into a deep dilemma, namely one of exerting power over others in contradiction to the grain of the universe. Ruth E. Krall, a psychologist who recently wrote a book on Yoder, claimed that he became "one more human host for transferring violence and human suffering from one generation to the next." The contradiction in which he lived cannot be more clearly expressed.

**Q:** Is that the demise of Yoder's theology?

**H-JG:** No, the future will probably depend on Yoder's theology being freed from the constraints and contradictions that can be observed in his thinking.

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Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *John Howard Yoder – Radikaler Pazifismus im Gespräch*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.

This thematic overview of Yoder's thought by Hans-Jürgen Goertz (the title can be translated as "Radical Pacifism in Dialogue") argues that the foundations of Yoder's peace theology must be re-established because of the repeated, serious, unanswered critiques raised over many years by various scholars, including Goertz himself. The book's purpose is not to look at Yoder's biography but to wrestle critically with his core arguments, drawing upon practically the entire corpus of Yoder's writings. Goertz describes the unity and consistency of Yoder's thought as a root-chord (*Grundakkord*), composed of three notes originating from his relationship with key mentors: in Anabaptist history (H.S. Bender), in theological ethics (Karl Barth), and in New Testament studies (Oscar Cullman). Goertz repeatedly questions the cogency of Yoder's appropriation of the three.

The book is structured as follows: Introduction; I. Early Years in Europe; II. Conversations with Anabaptists; III. Unity of the Churches; IV. Peace Theology; V. Extended Dialogues; and VI. Church and the World – Difference and Relationship, which summarizes Yoder's ecclesiology and is followed by a brief afterword. Chapters II-IV are each divided into two main sections. Goertz first presents a theme, drawing liberally upon the interpretations of most available studies of Yoder, including the most recent works by younger scholars. Then he presents a *Kritik*, where he explicates objectionable issues, also drawing upon others' critiques.

The author contends that Yoder's historical scholarship asserted the normativity of an ecclesiology expressed by early Swiss Anabaptists. Exalting the "Grebel-Sattler line" as a norm for assessing authentic historic Anabaptism, he further raised it as a standard for contemporary Mennonites and judged any deviations to be results of "borrowings." Thus Yoder's contemporary reforming agenda blurred the line between norm and model (*norma normata* becomes *norma normans*) (51).

Rather than accept a premise or critique from a dialogue partner, Yoder set the terms of the discussion. He led dialogue partners "toward his own argument and required that they give up their own questions, premises and concepts in the course of the dialogue" (74). Dialogue in this sense is coercive (79).

Arguing that the church's visible character can be spoken about only

in a “broken manner” (105), Goertz believes Yoder’s ecclesiology negatively impacts the argument that the church’s responsibility is in witnessing to the lordship of Christ rather than in changing history. The NT scholarship (O. Cullmann) Yoder used to base his main arguments on the lordship of Christ has been largely discredited (see, for example, Ernst Käsemann). Ultimately, “the relationship between Church and world is closer, the love toward the world more insightful (*verständnisvoller*) and more intense than Yoder’s writings intimate” (154).

Yoder’s ontologization of both church and state, as expressed in his notion of visibility, disallows the church’s engagement with the world in practical or effective ways. Goertz suggests that Yoder never adequately embraced Barth’s later theology, which moved beyond his formerly ontological concept of the church. Agreeing with critiques by Gordon Kaufman and James Reimer, Goertz affirms that the messianic community as the locus of salvation was not formulated as a message (*Botschaft*) but as a fact (*Tatsache*), i.e., the community is itself salvation (213).

The author argues that Yoder remained remarkably consistent throughout his career and despite his later extensions into further fields, his basic theological convictions remained intact and, perhaps even to his demise, unquestioned.

Whether Yoder himself considered his ethical arguments or his peace theology to be grounded in the NT narrative or church history would be disputed by those who read him as an anti-foundationalist, although the idea that Yoder saw the Jesus narrative as foundational for his ethics is quite obvious to many.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the foundationalist question, Goertz argues that Yoder’s peace ethics can and should be re-worked so that its weaknesses do not hinder the goals, impulses, and visions Goertz and many others share with Yoder. The author calls this method arguing “with Yoder against Yoder” (223), which he recommends as a fruitful direction for future Yoder studies.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, J. Denny Weaver, who argues that Yoder’s “conviction that the particular story of Jesus in the New Testament was the basis from which to address any issue.” “Introduction,” *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian*, ed. J. Denny Weaver (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 13. Weaver then calls the NT account of Jesus’ life the “foundational narrative” for Yoder’s thought (*ibid.*, 20).

Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute: Eine Rechenschaft*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010.

In this collection of non-systematic, ecumenically-engaged essays (the title means “Fragments of Radical Theology Today: An Account”), German Mennonite theologian Hans-Jürgen Goertz engages a broad range of topics on religious “radicality” that reflect both his life-long passion and earlier theological training plus his research into the historical Anabaptist tradition. He brings his notions of radicality to bear on current topics in theology, in reflection upon contemporary society and Christian heritage, and in questions ranging from the usability of history to postmodernity and the church-world dialectic. Peace theology plays a key role in several chapters.

There is no systematic organization to the book’s 22 chapters, some of them overlapping significantly, e.g., 8 (Conversation), 9 (Relationship), 18 (Dialogue–Unequal Partner [historical]), and 19 (Dialogue–Unequal Partner [theological]). Some topics appear as sub-topics under the rubric of “radicality,” such as 1 (Critique), 7 (Provisional Living), and 14 (Utopia). Other topics relate to the task of contemporary theology, including believer’s baptism, speech about God, and terms such as “peaceable” and “merciful.”

Goertz’s key interlocutors include Gordon Kaufman, John Howard Yoder, Paul Tillich, Luther, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Wolfgang Trillhaas (Goertz’s doctoral advisor), Schleiermacher, Zwingli, Michel Foucault, Müntzer, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. After radicality, the most frequently discussed subjects are the church and Anabaptism, followed by anticlericalism, creativity, freedom, history, justice, pacifism, peace, Reformation, truth, the Unconditional, and the world.

The author defines radicality this way: “That which is radical is not only a particularly daring or bold thought, rather, something is radical first and foremost, when there are still traces of experience that adhere to its emergence and it becomes actualized with these impulses toward a fundamental alteration in the realm of everyday experiences” (20). The Reformation was thus only radical inasmuch as the multi-faceted, anticlerical reform programs—including Luther’s and Zwingli’s—sought to “unhinge” the old medieval system and looked to divine salvation in everyday experience. Such an unhinging process is also at work in radicality today.

Goertz explains that the fragmentary process in which this radicalized reforming occurred necessarily took the form of a social movement characterized by spontaneity, fluctuating membership, and changing orientations. The institutional church was not its “organizational form” (21). The connection between radical theology and social movements is crucial for Goertz.

The author explains that such Reformation radicality was marked by experimentalism and provisionality, and “therefore suitable for mediating the feeling to the laity, of now turning away from the harm done by Christianity and being able to lend a new face to the church” (21). Further, radicality “cannot be regulated.” It usually occurs “when the discrepancy between sacred and profane experience has become too large or unbearable for many. Today it is less the discrepancy between the sacred, cultic realm and everyday experience than the discrepancy between sacred and profane language that can barely be bridged. Usually the efforts to overcome this discrepancy become oriented by means of a new reading of the Holy Scriptures” (22). Religious radicality is “what breaks through the ‘continuity of acquaintance’ and opens itself to the spirit, which blows where it wants. Radical theology, in its very approach, is pneumatologically-aligned theology” (23).

The subjects Goertz addresses in fragmentary ways are subjected to this mode of theological reflection rather than to systematic reasoning under conventional categories. As explained on the back cover and in the Foreword, following Karl Barth’s distinction between “regular” and “irregular” theology, Goertz’s reflections are “irregular” fragments that express what he considers vital issues.

Chapter 8 discusses the nature of dialogue, particularly in reference to Kaufman and Yoder, and chapter 9 comments further on the concept of relationality, future, and tradition, a topic that also arises in chapters 18-19. The historical section brings out Goertz’s views on the challenges of ecumenical dialogues held recently between Mennonites and Catholics, for example, and how history is held in tension, given the different elements of historian, theologian, and ecumenical processes.

The book will interest those engaged in German Protestant theology who share the key concerns of ecumenical theology and are prepared to consider the social dimension of reform both in its historical, Reformation-

era developments and in contemporary reflections on the nature of faith and life. The “fragments” will also be stimulating for Mennonites who share Goertz’s general quest for radicality.

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Wendy VanderWal-Gritter. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014.

In *Generous Spaciousness* Wendy VanderWal-Gritter draws on her knowledge as a practitioner with more than ten years’ experience as executive director of New Direction Ministries of Canada to promote and embody a response to gay Christians that encourages all members of the faith community to live into postures of trust, openness, and mutual respect regardless of sexual orientation. Her approach resists polarizing position statements of “for” or “against” regarding the morality of same-sex attraction. She writes primarily for North American evangelical Christians and for those committed to discerning what it means to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in all areas of life, including human sexuality. In the process she attends to a wide variety of perspectives on same-sex attraction and to the experiences of Christians who claim various sexual orientations. This is one of the ways she demonstrates how “generous spaciousness” functions as a “posture of openness that is inquisitive, personal, relational, and dependent on the Spirit” (26) and that reflects an understanding of unity in diversity (174).

After locating herself as an evangelical Christian and naming her context, the author demonstrates the need for generous spaciousness by highlighting the shortcomings of existing and historical responses to gay persons in evangelicalism. She argues that doubt and questions are a natural part of faith and that people’s experiences of attraction are diverse, and reiterates that Christians come to a variety of conclusions about same-sex attraction, e.g., same-sex attraction as rebellion, which requires repentance, or same-sex attraction as difference, which leads to celebration (70).

VanderWal-Gritter then shifts to articulating the key characteristics of generous spaciousness by exploring it as a response to people coming-

out as gay in the church and within the context of discipleship. She argues that generous spaciousness grows out of a holistic understanding of sexuality and a view of the “image of God” as loving others as God loves us (129). It is also rooted in scripture and uses the person of Christ and his ministry to the marginalized as a guiding interpretive principle (158). She concludes with three chapters detailing specific advice for how this approach can be embodied and practiced by members of the church, pastors and leaders, and gay Christians.

*Generous Spaciousness* offers a much needed approach to Christian discourses on sexuality and the body. While many contributions on same-sex attraction set up dichotomies of for and against, VanderWal-Gritter develops a genuine alternative founded in an understanding of openness as “the natural extension of the life of Christ,” who has come to break dividing walls, to embody reconciliation, and to remove barriers (93). Her approach is particularly valuable given its commitment to, and demonstration of, biblical and Christological understandings of justice, peace, and love as they relate to human sexuality. Her claim that voices of truth come from those who have wrestled with the systemic violence perpetrated against them (127), and her caveat that unity in diversity requires the consent of those with the least privilege—e.g., gay Christians—in order to be a safe environment for generous spaciousness (181) are two examples of her close attention to justice via power relations in the Christian community.

Although the exclusive use of male language for God and the brief reference to mutual submission require unpacking, the author’s articulation of generous spaciousness has enormous potential to inform Mennonite discourses on sexuality and the body. Conversations on same-sex marriage and the morality of homosexuality continue to cause painful fissures in the church and the academy as various sides argue the authority of one interpretation of scripture over another. Now more than ever there is the need for an approach to same-sex attraction in the Mennonite church and theology that can conceive of unity in diversity.<sup>1</sup> *Generous Spaciousness* offers

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<sup>1</sup> Mennonite theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder makes this argument in “Theological Conversations about Same-Sex Marriage: An Opportunity for the Church to be Scriptural in its Discernment,” in *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honour of A. James Reimer*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul G. Doerksen, and Karl Koop (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 62.

such an approach flowing from a life in Christ and modeling love rather than fear. It has the potential to transform Mennonite battlegrounds regarding gay Christians into opportunities to “be transformed into the likeness of Christ in the midst of our diversity” (190).

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James K. A. Smith. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

*How (Not) to Be Secular* is “a book about a book” (ix). This slim volume is an introduction, summary, and commentary on *A Secular Age*, a massive intellectual history of secular modernity by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. In his 900 pages, Taylor challenges the “subtraction story” of mainstream secularization theory, which sees contemporary secularism as the inevitable effect of a decline in religious belief and superstition started by the Enlightenment. In contrast, Taylor contends that the disenchantment of modernity is the unexpected invention of late medieval and early modern “Reform” movements that flattened religious hierarchies, simplified religious practice, and sparked a new interest in nature and ordinary life. Of course, whether Protestant or Catholic, the agents of reform had no idea they were helping create a more secular way to imagine society and the world; nevertheless, Taylor traces the roots of modern “exclusive humanism” to these changes in Christian theology, devotion, and practice.

James K. A. Smith, in turn, takes Taylor’s arguments as the starting point for a guide on how to live out faith in modernity. That is, in *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Smith is not just an academic writing about another academic for an academic audience but is attempting to make Taylor’s philosophy accessible for lay readers ranging from baristas to pastors. So instead of opening with his summary of Taylor’s taxonomy of different meanings for “the secular” (20-23), Smith first explores secularity through the meditations of agnostic Julian Barnes, who doesn’t believe in God yet feels haunted by religion in a way that illustrates what Taylor calls an “echo” of transcendence. Similarly, Smith highlights the novels of David Foster Wallace as illuminating



the “cross-pressures” of our increasingly enclosed universe. As Smith puts it, Wallace “documents a world of almost suffocating immanence . . . God is dead, but he’s replaced by everybody else” (14). Smith also often suggests possible questions and applications of Taylor’s ideas for practitioners, while avoiding easy pieties, arguing for example that contemporary Christian apologetics is often what Taylor calls “spin,” “an overconfident ‘picture’ within which we can’t imagine it being otherwise” (95-96).

Applications aside, though, the bulk of *How (Not) to Be Secular* is devoted to a careful, clear, and comprehensive exposition of Taylor’s book. Each of Smith’s five chapters deftly work through the five parts of *A Secular Age*, focusing on main themes without getting bogged down in the complex details of Taylor’s argument. Diagrams, lists, and metaphors are used judiciously to illustrate key points such as the “nova effect,” a term for “an explosion of all sorts of ‘third ways’” between orthodoxy and unbelief (64). Smith’s prose is at times elegant, as when he explains that the modern question is not *if* we live in a secular (“immanent”) frame but whether we “inhabit it as a closed frame with a brass ceiling [or] an open frame with skylights open to transcendence” (93). Smith also probes the limitations of Taylor’s account, suggesting its apparent “tension between *creaturely* goods and *eternal* goods” may be “a hangover of . . . scholastic Thomism.” Smith favors a more Reformed continuity between nature and grace (48, note 1). Similarly, he criticizes Taylor’s willingness to “jettison aspects of historic Christian teaching” rather than imagine new ways to meet modern spiritual aspirations (113). Still, overall Smith restricts himself to presenting Taylor’s ideas rather than critiquing them.

The author himself sees his book as best read in conjunction with *A Secular Age*; but especially for those who will not read Taylor’s tome, or for those who have tried and failed, *How (Not) to Be Secular* is essential. Mennonites and Anabaptists in particular will be interested in Taylor’s diagnosis of the latent tensions of the Protestant Reformation (summarized in Smith, 35-45). Alas, Smith follows Taylor in neglecting the Radical Reformation, although the radical reformers exemplify the shifts towards moral perfectionism and voluntary ecclesiology that both Smith and Taylor identify. Mennonites and Anabaptists may also have mixed reactions to Smith’s enthusiasm for sacramental Christianity as the cure for conservative,

liberal, and emerging Protestants' shared captivity to the "immanent frame" (92, note 1 and 138, note 10).

Nevertheless, readers in any church tradition, or none at all, can benefit from Smith's accessible and lively book. Although having read Charles Taylor is not necessary for understanding *How (Not) to Be Secular*, some background knowledge of history and philosophy would be helpful.

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Ralph P. Martin. *2 Corinthians: Word Biblical Commentary*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

Ralph P. Martin's commentary was originally published in 1986. In the preface to this revised, 751-page edition, Martin notes that he has corrected small errors but was "not inclined to meddle with the text" (10)—a wise course for an octogenarian whose earthly life ended a year before this edition was published. Instead, he and "a cohort of willing helpers" (10) updated the already-vast bibliography and added twelve new excursuses on key topics.

These helpers include Carl N. Toney as overall supervisor of the revision, together with Mark W. Linder and David J. Downs. The new material is scattered throughout the commentary and is printed on gray paper in order to distinguish it from the original copy. Since 2 Corinthians itself is a composite letter, it seems appropriate that a commentary on it should include material from different sources and time periods. If only Paul had so clearly identified the dates, helpers, opponents, and specific conflicts in 2 Corinthians, how much paper and speculation we would save today!

Martin retains his overall conclusion that 2 Corinthians is composed of just two letters: (a) chapters 1-9 written earlier about Paul's deep desire for Corinthian believers to be reconciled with him and with God; and (b) chapters 10-13, reflecting new conflicts because of rival super-apostles bringing a "different gospel" from the one Paul proclaimed to them (11:4). Although chapters 1-9 show definite breaks in thought, Martin explains them as Paul's writing sections of the letter at different times because of interruptions in his missionary lifestyle. Even 6:14-7:2, which may not be Pauline, is used by Paul

to further his agenda. This conclusion disagrees with those of scholars who find three, four, or more smaller letters in 2 Corinthians.

I will not comment further on Martin's 1986 edition, since there are 18 reviews of it, mostly positive, in the American Theological Library Association database. I will focus instead on some of the twelve excursuses. Martin wrote seven of them, on these topics: the history of the composition of 2 Corinthians; revisiting the identity of the opponents of Paul; theology and mission in 2 Corinthians; Paul's collection; the relationship of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; Israel's salvation and the gentiles' reconciliation; and "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" in 2 Cor. 13:14. Occasionally, Martin evaluates recent research by other scholars, but his larger purpose appears to be articulating his own recent thinking on a topic or summarizing larger ideas that the verse-by-verse structure of the commentary had constrained.

For example, Martin integrates Paul's theological reflections on Jews and gentiles in Rom. 9-11 with 2 Cor. 8:13-14, where Paul explains how his collection will promote mutual obligation between the gentiles and the Jerusalem church (447-49). An essay on chapters 10-13 (105-115) discusses Paul's opponents as possible "Judaizers" or "Hellenists," but Martin avoids specifics and concludes by identifying them as apostles who promote a "theology of glory" in contrast to Paul's "theology of the cross" where "strength is perfected in weakness" (115).

Carl Toney's first excursus discusses multiple theories on the composition of 2 Corinthians developed between 1985 and 2007. He maintains Martin's view above but recognizes how impossible it is to be certain (50-63). In "Rhetorical Studies of 2 Corinthians" (82-93), Toney moves beyond Martin's scattered references to rhetoric, and systematically analyzes Greco-Roman rhetoric to show how it can help readers understand Paul's theology on its own terms. Toney's third excursus compares Paul's view of resurrection in 2 Corinthians with his previous discussion in 1 Cor. 15 (250-56).

Mark Linder's essay on social-scientific criticism in 2 Corinthians from the past two decades provides a welcome break from the heavier (for me) rhetorical and theological issues (94-104). Linder draws heavily from Bruce Malina and John Pilch, but unfortunately their book, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) is never named nor listed in any bibliography or index. They accept 2 Corinthians as a composite of five letters (plus the non-Pauline 6:14-7:1) and show

how these fit into “the dispute process” between Paul and his Corinthian house churches. David Downs’s “Collection in 2 Corinthians (1985-2008)” highlights the collection’s critical importance through recent studies connecting it to Greco-Roman patronage, economic issues, and Paul’s tensions with the Jerusalem church (421-27).

It can be hard to see the big picture in Martin’s intensely detailed commentary. These additional excursuses helpfully summarize main ideas and bring a 30-year-old commentary up to date.

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David M. Allen. *The Historical Character of Jesus: Canonical Insights from Outside the Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014.

Traditionally, historians of the life of Jesus limit themselves to the material found in such gospels as the canonized Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and sometimes other non-canonized works such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. David M. Allen bucks this trend in *The Historical Character of Jesus*. This aptly titled book asks what we may learn about the historical (or historian’s) Jesus if we expand our data pool to include the rest of the New Testament outside the Gospels. What Allen presents is not so much bare-bone historical “facts” about Jesus, the sort of thing some seek to mine from gospels, but the “character” of Jesus, i.e., his mental and moral qualities, as he is remembered and proclaimed throughout the NT.

The book comprises nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The seven middle chapters examine how Jesus—most specifically the “earthly,” pre-resurrection/ascension Jesus—is presented in Acts, the undisputed Pauline Epistles, the disputed Pauline Epistles (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastorals), Hebrews, James, the Petrine Epistles, Jude, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation. What emerges from these chapters is the relevance of this earthly Jesus for the early audiences of these books. The authors don’t share information about his hometown or family, or about many of the central events in his life. Instead, they present Jesus’ character as a model for his followers.

What Allen's work shows is that Jesus' suffering and death were central to how people remembered his pre-resurrection life. The "historical" Jesus of these works is first and foremost a Jesus who suffered and died. His moral example for Christian readers/hearers of these books is presented in order to inspire endurance in the face of persecution or other forms of opposition. Additionally, Jesus' teachings have been integrated into the preaching of these early Christians, sometimes with reference to Jesus (e.g., Paul in 1 Cor. 11:23) and sometimes as only an echo of him (e.g., James 2:8's reference to the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor as one's self).

The reader who approaches this volume under the impression that it will deliver the type of information often sought in other studies of the historical Jesus—e.g., whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem, whether he predicted the destruction of the temple, whether he self-identified as a messiah figure—may be disappointed. Allen admits that "if the aim of our exercise is to use the non-Gospel material to shed light on the life of Jesus, then we cannot venture too much further forward" (172). Therefore, this book is less a contribution to historical Jesus research in the strictest sense and more a contribution to canonical/NT Christology.

Yet it would be a mistake to say that it does not contribute to historical Jesus studies at all. Recent years have witnessed a concentrated effort to ask whether it is truly possible to parse the Jesus of history from the Jesus of tradition. Some scholars have begun to advocate an approach to the study of the historical Jesus that focuses more on "Jesus remembered," i.e., what traditions about Jesus tell us about the general impression Jesus of Nazareth left on his earliest followers. In this sense, Allen does offer something for scholars of the historical Jesus to consider: Does the "Jesus remembered" of the non-Gospel parts of the NT tell us anything about what sort of person Jesus was?

For students of the historical/historian's Jesus, Allen's book is valuable in helping them see what facets of Jesus' life were of central importance for those not writing biography-style gospels. In the canonical gospels Jesus' passion is arguably the most climactic event. For other NT authors this appears to remain the case. Jesus' suffering and death left a great impression on later followers of his message.

For general readers of the NT, and for students of Christian theology,

Allen's book will broaden one's Christology, placing center stage often marginalized or accidentally overlooked canonical literature. Similarly, for preachers and teachers in the context of the local church this book can function as a gateway to parts of the NT that are either ignored or read for purposes other than to find out what they say about Jesus. Allen establishes Jesus' centrality across the NT, even in places where many might not think to look.

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Felipe Hinojosa. *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014.

The last couple of decades have seen a number of outstanding works on the history of religion among Latina/os in the United States. Felipe Hinojosa has added *Latino Mennonites* to the list of indispensable works. In addition to shedding light on the story of the small but active group of Latina/os who worked in the Mennonite church in America in the 20th century, he explores a neglected aspect of the history of Latina/o religion: the cooperation and tension between religious Latina/os, African-Americans, and progressive whites in the struggle for the civil rights of minorities undertaken from the context of their particular faith communities.

The narrative of *Latino Mennonites* begins in the 1930s—when Latinas/os began to become Mennonites and gather in Latina/o Mennonite communities in Chicago, South Texas, Puerto Rico, and New York City—and ends in the early 1980s with the celebration of the fifty years of Latina/o Mennonite presence. Hinojosa's main contribution is moving beyond the analysis of single ethnic groups and also looking at the relationship between black and Latina/o Mennonites. He shows that black, Latina/o, and progressive white Mennonites joined hands in the struggle for the rights of minorities.

In addition, *Latino Mennonites* serves as another milestone in recognizing the role played by Latina/os in the development of white-dominated denominations. In the specific case of Mennonites, this meant loosening the bounds of acceptable worship practices, embracing the

challenge of facing structural discrimination based on race, and developing a more significant concern for social justice.

*Latino Mennonites* is divided into three main parts. In the first part, the author traces the development of Mennonite missions among Latina/os in Chicago, South Texas, Puerto Rico, and New York City, and shows how the relationship between white, black, and Latina/o Mennonites pushed Mennonites to reconsider their stance on race relations both in the church and in the wider society. Part two deals with the role of the United Racial Council and the Minority Ministry Council role as vehicles for constructing Mennonite ethnic identity. It also shows the importance of the 1972 Cross-Cultural Youth Convention—which galvanized inter-ethnic solidarity in the multi-ethnic context of the Mennonite church—and the struggles surrounding the possibility of endorsing the United Farm Workers movement.

The third part of this volume deals with how Latinas were influential in fostering a disposition towards a “multiethnic brotherhood” in the Mennonite community as well as an evangelical spirit among Latina/o Mennonites, and with how Latina/o Mennonites challenged the dominant narrative within the Mennonite church by merging their hermeneutic with their concerns for social justice. Hinojosa concludes by emphasizing the role of Chicano and Puerto Rican movements on the way evangelical Latina/os imagined themselves and on how minority organizations formed in the Mennonite church forced it to reconsider its social imagination. The author argues that Latina/o and African-American Mennonites faced strong resistance from white Mennonites who failed to acknowledge the ethnocentric undertones of their missiology, hierarchy, and theology. He also points to another contentious issue that remains largely unexplored from a historical perspective: the Mennonite struggle with immigrant rights and the place of LGBT Mennonites.

The well-crafted narrative, strong archival research, compelling interpretation of sources, and careful insights provided in *Latino Mennonites* makes it a profitable read for anyone interested in religious history. Hinojosa’s presentation of the coalitions that formed in the Mennonite church around issues of race and social engagement reinforces the case for the argument that Latina/os—independent of denominational affiliation—are, many times,

more akin to African-Americans and Latina/os from other denominations than to the white establishment perpetuated by the hierarchies of their own faith communities. Hinojosa focuses on the Mennonite community, but he offers a useful framework with which to assess the interplay between intra-denomination and socio-political tensions, national politics, and cultural developments.

*Latino Mennonites* is more than a good narrative; it is also a needed reflection on the multi-ethnic tensions within sectors of American Christianity. As such, academics, students, and parishioners alike would benefit from its contributions. Those interested in Mennonite history, ethnic history, evangelicalism, Chicano studies, and the Civil Rights Movement will profit from reading this book, which offers a compelling argument and deals with complex issues in a concise, responsible manner.

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Darrin W. Snyder Belousek. *Good News: The Advent of Salvation in the Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014.

In this short, accessible volume, Darrin Snyder Belousek aims to show that the good news of salvation in the Gospel of Luke is neither narrowly tied to Jesus' death on the cross nor to life in heaven after death. Rather, Jesus extends salvation to people throughout his life, and this salvation is good news already here and now. This salvation is holistic and comprehensive. It encompasses healing, freedom from fear, right relationships, justice, forgiveness—in short, everything that is *shalom*. According to Belousek, salvation is both/and, not either/or. It is liberation from personal-psychological-spiritual powers and social-political-economic powers; it is a gift of God and requires a response of active faith; it encompasses peace and justice and mission and evangelism; it is both already present and not yet fully here.

Throughout the book the author emphasizes the believer's role in salvation. Those who come to Jesus for healing express their faith in action



(chapter 3). Salvation requires a response of repentance and fruit-bearing, economic redistribution, and renunciation of violence (chapters 4 and 5). Singing praises to the God who sets people free both anticipates and enacts God's liberation (chapter 6). Recipients of God's salvation are sent out to proclaim the good news of God's peace in word and deed (chapter 7).

The author grounds Luke's good news of salvation firmly in God's promises in the Old Testament. In the first chapter he examines what he calls the "gospel before the gospels," particularly the message of Second Isaiah. Later, prophets such as Jeremiah and Amos reinforce the centrality of justice and peace in God's salvation; Jeremiah's words to the Babylonian exiles provide a precedent for the post-Pentecost mission to the nations. Belousek also interacts with New Testament texts beyond Luke: James provides insight into the sin of greed; Acts portrays God setting prisoners free; and Paul offers an example of voluntary economic redistribution.

While *Good News* does not break new interpretive ground, it does offer excellent insights into many biblical texts. For example, the discussion of four parallel phrases in Isaiah 52 sheds light on how Luke uses this text, and nicely lifts out motifs of rejection, peace, and trust in the disciples' mission in Luke 9 and 10. (Occasionally Belousek tries to make the text say more than it allows. It is not clear, for instance, that Levi's dinner party is an act of restitution, or that God sends Simeon out on a service mission after he sees Jesus.) Also very appealing is the way Belousek bridges the gap between the biblical text and contemporary experience. He seamlessly weaves in stories of modern-day prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr., and contemporary examples of injustice such as America's "wars of consumption." He makes the biblical text come alive and demonstrates its ongoing relevance for the church.

Although the author rightly and eloquently argues for an expansive understanding of salvation in Luke, he errs in omitting the cross almost entirely from his discussion. To be sure, Luke does not include the "ransom saying" that Matthew and Mark have, and his atonement theology is not Paul's. However, the link between Jesus' death and salvation is not as absent as Belousek implies: Jesus' words at the Last Supper institute a new covenant in his death. On the cross Jesus promises the bandit beside him a place in paradise, takes the place of the sinner Barabbas, forgives his killers, and

“saves others” only by not coming down from the cross. Repeatedly Luke highlights the “necessity” of Jesus’ death in God’s overall purposes. As well, Belousek seriously misrepresents the substitutionary view of the atonement in his eagerness to dissociate salvation in Luke from the cross. He seems to suggest that in substitutionary atonement Jesus’ death “substitutes” for obedience and right living, implying that for proponents of this view ethics is irrelevant.

In the preface, the author helpfully situates himself within two particular traditions, and it is evident throughout that both Anabaptist/Mennonite discipleship ethics and Benedictine spiritual practice are influential. Although he claims not to “employ the standard scholarly methods of historical, form, or literary criticism” (xii), he does rely on the work of such scholars.

*Good News* will appeal to a broad Christian audience and is suitable for lay readers, students, and pastors. Although not scholarly in tone, it is informed by solid biblical scholarship and written in clear prose. In keeping with the title, it indeed presents salvation in the Gospel of Luke as good news.

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**GLOBAL MENNONITE PEACEBUILDING: A CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL**  
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