

## Book Review

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

In this last book to be published before his death, John Howard Yoder took on the task of clarifying and defending his life's work in biblical ethics. It is explicitly and self-consciously about the theologian himself. This is evident in several transparent ways. First, Yoder informs readers in the Introduction that his aim here is to correct the "misunderstanding and misrepresentation" of his position "by friends as well as friendly critics" as advocating a "sectarian" isolation of the ethical life of the church from public life and a rejection of public politics. "The essays in this collection," he says, "are intentionally devoted to demonstrating the wrongness of that characterization of my stance [as 'against the nations']."

Secondly, the whole book, mostly a collection of previously unpublished work, is indeed structured around this goal. The first section contains his most recent essays, all of which defend the claim that the ethics of Jesus (grounded in the ethics of the Jewish people in exile) is an ethic "for the nations," and not just for the community of believers. The following three sections contain much earlier essays and lectures, written as early as 1963, which Yoder offers as evidence that this theme has always been present in his thought. Thirdly, to reinforce the point, all of the earlier essays are supplemented with interpretive footnotes added by Yoder for inclusion in this book. Most of these notes are references to his other publications, designed to show that they fit together into one coherent whole.

To a great extent the strategy succeeds admirably. Consequently, the book not only goes a long way toward meeting Yoder's objective, but also, perhaps more interestingly, illustrates why the misunderstanding of his views could have occurred so easily. The language of the earlier essays has more the "against the nations" sectarian flavor than the later ones. For example, the early essays emphasize the distinctiveness of the ethic of Jesus over against the ethical outlook of the non-Christian social order. Christian ethics is "for

Christians,” and the larger society and its political structures cannot be expected to understand or appropriate it. The tone is one of the “over-against” nature of the Christian gospel—it stands in harsh judgment on an irredeemable social order.

In the later essays both the language and the tone are altered. Here the dominant image is God’s command through Jeremiah to the people of Israel in exile to “Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you,” which, Yoder says, “engaged the Jews to live *for the nations*.” The earlier language of church “against” a world that can never be Christian gives way to a language of church as teacher and example “for” a world that can benefit from it (even if it will never be fully Christian). While the earlier essays insist upon the distinctiveness of the Christian ethic from all other ways of life, to which it is always an “offense,” in the later essays such claims are moderated—“I am not preoccupied with disengaging the distinctiveness of Christianity,” Yoder says. Christian ethics is not “just for Christians.”

While the tone and language change in the later essays, Yoder succeeds in demonstrating that the basic axioms of his view have not changed: (1) The primary responsibility of the church is itself to live according to the discipline of Christ, as demonstrated in the historical person of Jesus; (2) The fundamental elements of this ethic—love, forgiveness, servanthood, nonviolence—contradict the dominant values of non-Christian society, which are based on the necessity of power, violence and revenge; (3) The social responsibility of Christians is *not* to “take charge” of that social order or to “make history come out right”; (4) The Christian gospel does not provide a blueprint for the just or good society. The identification of the gospel with any political ideology is idolatry; (5) The Christian hope for history is ultimately in the redemptive work of God in the world. It is God alone to whom the church must look to “fight for us.” These axioms form a consistent, unifying thread running through all these essays, confirming Yoder’s claim that he has always been committed to the view that the Christian ethic is not sectarian but truly a vision “for the nations.”

While Yoder’s collection provides a strong case for the consistency of his stance over the years, it is unfortunate that even the more recent essays stake out little new theological ground. This is all the more disappointing since this volume has turned out to be Yoder’s final book. It leaves unanswered

so many of the questions his friends and critics have put to him. For example, Yoder's intellectual strength is his ability to uncover the flaws in the philosophical and political ideologies of mainstream cultures—from Babylon and Athens to Constantinian Rome and Protestant America. He can reduce the epistemological foundations of modern ethics to ashes in a paragraph, but he exempts his own interpretations of the Bible and the Judeo-Christian story from the implications of his own critique. All the ethical outlooks of the non-Christian world are subject to the confusion of language and reason symbolized by Babel, but (Yoder's interpretation of) the biblical canon stands immune to the critique of Babel. Yoder is staunchly anti-foundationalist in his view of the possibility of an ethic that Christians and non-Christians might share, but he is strangely foundationalist in his biblical hermeneutics—there is only one right way to tell the story of Jesus. Its implications for the communal life of the church are clear; the problem is not one of *knowing* the truth but of *living* it. But are things all this clear for the church? Doesn't it learn much from the "world" about how to interpret its own story, just as the "world" learns from it? This is one respect in which Yoder's essays reinforce the criticism that his view is stereotypically "sectarian."

These essays also fail to discuss another critical issue which Yoder needed to address in order to provide a persuasive ethic for the church and "the nations." His main point has always been that the ethic of the church is not the ethic of power, control, and "social engineering" which characterizes non-Christian approaches to society and politics. The "politics of Jesus" provide a radical alternative order for the community of believers, based on love, forgiveness, and servanthood. So, what then does this alternative community look like? How does it handle the problems of human finitude and failing in its own organizational structures? What do these alternative values mean in everyday practice? By Yoder's own argument, the success of the community of believers in implementing an alternative way of life is the only validation of its witness to the world. Yet his writings have always been evasive on this issue. He avoids it with the argument that practical details cannot be specified in a blueprint applying to all times and places. They must be worked out in the day-to-day discernment guided by the Holy Spirit.

But surely this is not enough. If there is a better way to do things than the way nations and states typically do them, why can't they be specified? It

does not help to say, as Yoder always liked to say, that the church must avoid the temptation to “take charge” and “engineer” society. For, if the church is to establish an alternative moral community, then it must “take charge” of its own institutions and “engineer” them in certain ways. An ethic based on the inappropriateness of “taking charge” is no help here.

Yoder was well aware of these challenges. Those who admire the power of his thought and the insightfulness of his critiques of culture can only hope that they are addressed in other unpublished essays which may appear posthumously.

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