



**The Forest
And
The Trees**

Engaging

Paul Martens'

The Heterodox Yoder

Branson Parler

The Forest and the Trees

Engaging Paul Martens’ *The Heterodox Yoder*

Branson Parler

The Englewood Review of Books

<http://englewoodreview.org/>

© 2012 Branson Parler

All rights reserved.

Distributed by The Englewood Review of Books

Cover Photo via Wikimedia Commons

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kellerwald_004.jpg

For those interested in the thought and legacy of John Howard Yoder, Paul Martens continues to be an engaging and provocative voice. In *The Heterodox Yoder*, Martens clarifies and crystallizes his overall reading of Yoder, which he began exploring in his earlier work.¹ Martens continues to raise important questions surrounding Yoder's thought and, in doing so, forces us back to Yoder's text. I will briefly survey his argument before offering a lengthy critique that engages specific points in detail.

Summary

Martens uses the term "heterodox" to describe both Yoder and his own approach to Yoder. Regarding his own approach, Martens notes that there is an "orthodox" or accepted idea about which Yoder texts are most important, with *Politics of Jesus* leading the way. Rather than go this route, Martens focuses on texts that are supposedly underemphasized or seen as secondary. It should be noted that Martens' point here would have been more relevant fifteen or twenty years ago. Numerous authors have engaged Yoder from all kinds of angles, as seen in collections like *Radical Ecumenicity* and *The New Yoder* and in the wide and diverse cast of characters that have engaged Yoder's thought, including, among others, Daniel Boyarin, Craig Carter, Romand Coles, Richard Hays, Chris K. Heubner, John C. Nugent, and Peter Ochs. A survey of works by any of these authors will quickly dispel the idea that current Yoder scholarship reads Yoder primarily in terms of

¹ See Martens, "The Problematic Development of the Sacraments in the Thought of John Howard Yoder," *Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 3 (2006): 65-77; and Martens, "Universal History and a Not-Particularly Christian Particularity: Jeremiah and John Howard Yoder's Social Gospel," in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 131-146.

The Politics of Jesus. If anything, that text is utilized less and less because its main points are taken for granted by so many. Yoder's other texts are where the really interesting work has been going on for at least a decade. In this sense, Martens' approach to Yoder's corpus may not be as "heterodox" or atypical as he thinks. Second, Martens narrates the development of Yoder's thought development in an atypical way. He recognizes that he is working against the stream, but he develops his alternative narrative throughout the book. What is that alternative narrative? It begins by labeling Yoder a heterodox thinker. What pushes him outside the bounds of orthodoxy? According to Martens, Yoder fails to affirm "the particularity or uniqueness of Jesus Christ as a historical person and as a revelation of God" (2). Far from being the champion of Christian particularity, Yoder is best understood as a neo-Kantian thinker who reduced theology to ethics. Furthermore, these ethics are not particularly Christian at all. At best, they represent ethical monotheism; at worst, a form of secular sociology (4). Martens does not therefore dismiss Yoder, but points to him as a cautionary tale, takes what is helpful from his thought, and recognizes that there is great harm in Yoder's central impulse: to reduce theology to nothing more than a general and universalizable ethic that ultimately does not need Jesus.

Martens begins his argument by pointing out the centrality of discipleship and obedience in Yoder's early work. For Yoder, the Christian life centers on ethics. By focusing on ethics in this way, Martens argues, Yoder lays the foundation for his later slide away from Christian particularity. Yoder's free church ecclesiology, at least initially, provides the context for understanding both his theology and his ethics. But Yoder's

ecclesiology, and thus his theology and ethics, is increasingly framed in terms of politics. All terms—Jesus, conversion, salvation, the church, the eschaton—are defined under the rubric of the “political” (85). This prioritization of politics is “a sort of absurd, inverse enslavement to the logic of Troeltsch and the Niebuhrs” that does not adequately capture the richness and depth of how the Bible teaches us to think and speak about who God is and who we are (86). This prioritization of politics also affects how Yoder conceives of the relationship between the church and world.

In Yoder’s earlier work, according to Martens, such as *Christian Witness to the State*, middle axioms served as the bridge between the politics of the church and the wider world’s politics. Such axioms are language that is not specifically Christian that Yoder uses in a pragmatic way to move the world closer to the only norm for human life: God’s kingdom. In Yoder’s later work, however, Martens notes that this language of middle axioms drops away and the social processes or sacraments of the church become the mode of mediation between the church and world. A key factor driving this change, Martens continues, culminates in Yoder’s *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. To provide context for this work, Martens examines the correspondence between Yoder and Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild. He points out that these two have much in common: ethical value is the meta-criterion for reading sacred texts; ethics culminates in the messianic age; ethical means are determined by ends; action is valued over explanation; and Judaism is properly understood as nonviolent and antiestablishment (112). Why are these common points problematic? They signal that Jesus is dispensable to Yoder’s thought. Indeed, Martens seems to suggest that the common

denominator between Yoder and Schwarzschild is not "God with us" in Jesus, but Immanuel Kant. Practical reason wins out and Yoder does not need Jesus after all because he is just one instance of what may be discerned by other means. Intentionally or not, Yoder begins to move away from the particularity of Jesus and the church.

This movement away from the particularity of the church is further seen, Martens illustrates, in Yoder's view of the sacraments. Martens continues to develop a view, which I have criticized elsewhere, that Yoder flattens the sacraments into "sample civil imperatives" that can be heeded inside or outside the church.² Martens contends that Yoder's drive to escape the haunting charge of sectarianism leads him, ultimately, to compromise the unique identity of the church and the transcendent dimensions of the sacraments by reducing them to mere social processes (140). Although Yoder does much work to underscore how important the practices and politics of the church really are, his thought is so over-determined by what he is reacting against that he unwittingly reduces Christian faith to just another form of ethics or series of practices.

Critique

Early on, Martens claims that "the difficulty with Yoder's corpus is not that there are a few trees that are out of

² For my full engagement with Martens' earlier work, see Branson Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn: Why Yoder is Not an Ethicist," in *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder*, ed. John C. Nugent (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010), 173-192.

place. Rather, the difficulty is that Yoder's corpus may actually be a different forest than many think they are seeing" (17). My central disagreement with Martens is that there are too many trees in Yoder's corpus that simply do not fit into Martens' view of the forest. Although there are numerous issues that I would be interested to explore with Martens, I will limit my critical comments to three very significant trees for which Martens' thesis does not account. Those three trees are Yoder's definition of politics, the particularity of Christian ethics, and the nature of the sacraments. There are different ways that one could challenge Martens' thesis. Elsewhere, I have taken a more chronological approach, noting how Yoder consistently talks about the sacraments throughout his life.³ Here I take a different tack, offering a close reading of a number of texts, especially Yoder's texts on the sacraments, in order to show that Yoder is not saying what Martens thinks he is. A close reading does, however, take time and space, and so I would ask the reader to bear with me in walking through these crucial steps. I do not undertake this reading of Yoder with the notion that Yoder is right on all topics (as Martens worries about some Yoder interpreters) nor with the idea that I have privileged access to what Yoder "really meant" (15). Rather, given that Yoder is no longer with us, I simply want to do my best to do justice to the text of what Yoder actually says. Moreover, it should be noted that there are gross misinterpretations of Yoder's work in print, not because Yoder is so unclear and inconsistent, but because he wrote in scattered places and on scattered topics and because some scholars (often non-

³ See Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn," 181-183.

Mennonites) find it easier to defeat a straw man rather than the real Yoder.⁴

Tree 1: What does Yoder mean by politics?

In his third chapter, Martens argues that Yoder prioritizes political language above all else. Often, critics like Martens do not sufficiently recognize what Yoder means by “political.” Rather than use this term in a more limited way (as is the case for Weber, Troeltsch, and the Niebuhrs), Yoder employs the term in an expansive, Augustinian fashion: a *polis* is a community held together by what it loves, including what it loves in an ultimate way.⁵ So, “political” does not mean strictly “governmental” or “immanent” (versus transcendent), any more than Augustine’s talk of the “city/*polis* of God” means that Augustine is reductionistic.⁶ Martens’ critique would make sense if Yoder operated with a sacred/secular or religion/politics split, but he doesn’t. Yoder, like Augustine, sees politics as always already doxology and ethics as always already theology. Furthermore, numerous orthodox Bible scholars in our day (e.g., N. T. Wright, Gerhard Lohfink, Christopher J. H. Wright, et al.) agree with Yoder’s basic point,

⁴ A prime example of a horrendous misreading of Yoder is J. Budziszewski, “Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought,” in *Evangelicals in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). Although they are not as horrendous, there are similar misreadings of Yoder J. Daryl Charles, “Protestants and Natural Law,” 33-38; Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Guenther Haas, “The Effects of the Fall on Creational Social Structures: A Comparison of Anabaptist and Reformed Perspectives,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995):108-129

⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992. Reprint, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), viii. Cf. Gerald Schlabach, “The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as Augustinian Interlocutor,” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House/Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 231.

⁶ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 57.

namely, that God is using the “politics” or way of life of his people as a constitutive part of his plan for the redemption and restoration of all things (Gen 12:1-3; Deut 4:5-8).⁷ Jesus is not a replacement of that plan but the apex of this plan, which continues in the church.

We must also remember that the focus of much of Yoder’s corpus was, after all, on the politics of Jesus. In the nearly four decades since the first publication of *Politics*, many of Yoder’s main points have become commonplace, making it easy to forget how many of Yoder’s basic points were, in 1972, on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship and therefore necessary to emphasize, especially in conversation with ethicists, most of whom had not yet taken notice of the developments.⁸ Moreover, if Yoder judged that the social, cultural, and political aspects of Jesus had been underplayed for much of Christian history, it seems reasonable that he would respond by focusing mostly on that which had been underemphasized.

Yoder’s emphasis on the social, cultural, and political facets of Christianity is still needed in some Christian contexts today. I regularly encounter Christians who think of Jesus primarily or even solely as coming so that they can have a personal relationship with God that will enable them to go to heaven when they die. In other words, they do not think of the church’s life together as an essential part of Christianity. Part of why I find Yoder so helpful is that countless Christians are still where Yoder’s audience was in the 1950’s-1970’s. As a result,

⁷ I owe this insight to John Nugent.

⁸ Richard Hays speaks highly of Yoder’s exegesis in *Politics*, stating that “at numerous points, his readings reflect an astute—indeed, almost prescient—grasp of important developments in the field of New Testament studies.” *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 245.

many people simply lack the register to perceive the social, cultural, political aspects of the Gospel or understand why the church's life is essential, not optional, for followers of Jesus. That is why, for example, forty years after *Politics* was published, N. T. Wright still has to inform people that Jesus came to create a new *polis*, a new people, not just save individual souls.⁹

How does Yoder respond to criticisms against prioritizing the language of politics? Anticipating such criticism, in the 1972 edition of *Politics*, Yoder states that he is not trying to address all things that could be said of Jesus or to imply that a broader or different focus is inherently problematic; he is trying to rectify an omission:

My presentation, in order to correct for the one-sided social ethic which has been dominant in the past, emphasizes what was denied before: Jesus as teacher and example, not only as sacrifice; God as the shaker of the foundations, not only as guarantor of the orders of creation; faith as discipleship, not only as subjectivity. The element of debate in the presentation may make it seem that the “other” or “traditional” element in each case – Jesus as sacrifice, God as creator, faith as subjectivity – is being rejected. It should therefore be restated that – as perusal of the structure of our presentation will confirm – no such disjunction is intended. I am rather defending the New Testament against the exclusion of the “messianic” element. The disjunction must be laid to the account of the traditional view, not of mine. It is those other views that say that

⁹ See http://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/01/nt_wright_at_calvin_college_ja.html

because Jesus is seen as sacrifice he may not be seen as sovereign, or that because he is seen as Word made flesh he cannot be seen as normative person.¹⁰

In the 1994 epilogue to this chapter, in response to critics already voicing Martens' concerns, Yoder notes that this paragraph might have been better placed in a more prominent position in the book, since many of his critics either missed it or "did not believe it," as he puts it.¹¹

Martens certainly does either miss it or not believe it, and in doing so, he misses the *real* movement that has taken place in Yoder's thought: rather than becoming more reductionistic, he generally becomes more expansionist and less reductionist as he matures. For example, Martens makes much of the fact that, in an unpublished 1954 document, Yoder dismisses more traditional accounts of atonement, including that of Anselm (31). Yet, as Rachel Reesor-Taylor compellingly argues, Yoder's corpus as a whole reveals that he ends up unwilling to dismiss Anselmian views of the atonement and recognizes positive dimensions to it (unlike Denny Weaver's unfortunate dichotomy between Anabaptism and Nicea, for

¹⁰ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 226.

¹¹ Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 227. Mark Thiessen Nation echoes Yoder's own sentiment, noting that the charge of reductionism cannot be maintained: "I can only imagine that various theologians, apparently with their own agendas, believe that Yoder is here being disingenuous. That is to say, perhaps they believe he *only* says this to keep orthodox Christians with him in his argument. However, this cynical view is difficult to sustain if someone knows and is honest about a broad range of Yoder's writings" ("Mending Fences and Finding Grace: Regarding Christology and Divine Agency in Yoder's Thought," a paper presented at the conference "Inheriting John Howard Yoder," Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, May 25-26, 2007, <http://www.emu.edu/seminary/resources/christologymtn.html>, accessed December 29, 2009).

example).¹² In 1994, the mature Yoder gives his readers a clear hermeneutic key to his intentions by drawing attention to the fact that he does not want to exclude certain dimensions of the Christian faith—including Jesus as sacrifice, God as guarantor of the orders of creation, faith as subjectivity. What is going on here? Yoder has changed his mind and moved, but it is in precisely the opposite direction that Martens argues. The young Yoder is willing to draw absolute hard and fast divisions between his view and elements of the broader Christian tradition; the mature Yoder is not.

Tree 2: Christian Ethics and Particularity

In addition to prioritizing language of politics, Martens argues that Yoder exchanges the particularity of Jesus and the church for a generic, neo-Kantian emphasis on ethics. I strongly disagree with Martens on this score and I believe his position can be maintained only by ignoring large swaths of Yoder's work, including Yoder's actual stated views on Christian ethics (both early and late in life) and his emphasis on apocalyptic literature, which further underscores the uniqueness of Jesus.

Yoder's 1966 critique of Reinhold Niebuhr makes it clear that Yoder believed the following about ethics:

1. Christian ethics are based on the reality of the resurrection, not on the generic goodness of human nature.
2. The doctrine of regeneration means that Christian ethics can draw from sources not available to non-Christians, including the Holy Spirit and Scripture.

¹² Rachel Reesor-Taylor, "Yoder's Mischievous Contribution to Mennonite Views on Anselmian Atonement," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 303-317.

3. The Holy Spirit provides the power for Christians to behave ethically in history in a new way.¹³

I fear that Martens' own interpretive grid does not allow him to take Yoder's remarks here straightforwardly. For Yoder, Christian ethics are not intelligible or do-able apart from the power of the living God. And these are not isolated remarks. In different articles from the 1980's and 1990's, Yoder reiterates his position that theology and ethics are inseparable, which is why I have claimed elsewhere that Yoder is not an ethicist in the modern, post-Kantian sense, where ethics gets divorced from theology.¹⁴ This is why it simply does not make sense to say that Yoder reduces theology to ethics or politics; for Yoder (as for many theologians in Christian history), there is no such thing as ethics in the modern sense, in which ethics are divorced from theology.

The connection between ethics and theology, and ethics and doxology, comes to the fore in Yoder's discussion of apocalyptic literature. How does apocalyptic literature connect to Martens' thesis? Yoder was emphasizing apocalyptic literature at the exact same time (the early 1990's) that he is writing numerous articles on the sacraments. Yet, noticeably absent from Martens' bibliography are Yoder's two key essays on apocalyptic literature.¹⁵ Moreover, a search for "Revelation 5" on the Yoder Index (www.yoderindex.com) reveals that this apocalyptic and doxological text—in which Jesus, the Crucified

¹³ Yoder, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism* (Washington, D.C.: The Church Peace Mission, 1966), 21-22.

¹⁴ See, for example, Yoder, "The Experiential Etiology of Evangelical Dualism," *Missiology: An International Review* 11, no. 4 (1983): 458; and Yoder, "A Theological Critique of Violence," in *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 38.

¹⁵ Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 43-61; and Yoder, "Ethics and Eschatology," *Ex Auditu* 6 (1990): 119-128.

Lamb, is worshipped by the hosts of heaven as worthy of praise, honor, glory, and power—is mentioned by Yoder throughout his life and work. Why is this so important? Because far from being reductionistic, Yoder appeals to apocalyptic literature in order to underscore that Christian ethics are sustained by a transcendent source—take God out of the picture and everything falls apart.¹⁶ And Yoder does not just appeal to a generic transcendence or a “reductionist horizontalism” that *validates* apocalypticism by the ethics it produces. Instead, Yoder argues that, in the biblical worldview, “the ‘beyond’ came first. Divine command, divine agency, divine will are prior to, not derived from, extrapolated from our finitude. An ethic of *torah* or *halakah*, or an ethic of discipleship, is therefore deeper, more rooted in the nature of things, than an ethic which seeks to manipulate the causal nexus for the best.”¹⁷ As Yoder reiterates elsewhere—in an essay written in 1992 and revised in 1996—Christian life and ethics can only be sustained by a Christian worldview, at the heart of which is the belief that there is one true God and that this God is the central actor in history.¹⁸ Far from reducing theology to ethics, Yoder is pointing out that Christian ethics, properly understood, are unintelligible apart from God. Moreover, these ethics are rooted in Jesus and the way of Jesus, which is why “people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.”¹⁹ The upshot of Yoder’s essays on apocalypticism is a reminder that Christians take their cues from the biblical vision of the Crucified Lamb.

¹⁶ Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 126.

¹⁷ Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 126.

¹⁸ Yoder, “On Not Being in Charge,” in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright & Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 174.

¹⁹ Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” 58.

This apocalyptic vision is also connected to the link between Yoder's doctrine of creation and redemption. In the midst of a sinful fallen world, Yoder claims, apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain so that we can see the foundational reality that Jesus' call to follow his path of cross and resurrection is "ontologically founded, connected to the arc from creation to apocalypse."²⁰ So he says, "The way of discipleship is the way for which we are made; there is no other 'nature' to which grace is a *superadditum*."²¹ In other words, "the behavior God calls for is not alien to us; it expresses what we really are made to be."²² So, at the end of "Firstfruits," Yoder reiterates his affirmation of the apocalyptic or theological nature of ethics: "the church's being shaken and moved, being vulnerable, defines or constitutes its participation in the travail of the Lamb who was slain and is therefore worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. That suffering is powerful, and that weakness wins, is true not only in heaven but on earth. That is a statement about the destiny not only of the faith community but also of all creation."²³

Unfortunately, Martens does not tell us how the above themes of Yoder's thought fit with his thesis that Yoder does not affirm the particular uniqueness of Jesus. Revelation 5 is a tree that Martens' view of the forest simply cannot account for. Instead, after surveying the Yoder-Steven Schwarzschild dialogue that took place throughout the 1970's, Martens argues that Yoder loses the particularity of Jesus in large part because

²⁰ Yoder, "That Household We Are," 7.

²¹ Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 36.

²² Yoder, "Are You the One Who Is to Come?" in *For the Nations*, 212.

²³ Yoder, "Firstfruits," 35.

Schwarzschild is sympathetic to Kant and because Yoder's position is understandable to the Jew Schwarzschild (114). This is an interesting line of argumentation. Does it hold up?

We should first note that there always remained a significant difference between Yoder and Schwarzschild: Yoder holds that Jesus is normative and that Jesus is Lord. That is a big difference. Yoder has come under fire from Peter Ochs precisely for making the claim that Jesus the Messiah and thus normative for Judaism (although Yoder would probably point out that this is precisely what makes him a Christian).²⁴ Ochs and Martens cannot both be right and I side with Ochs on this score, albeit while affirming Yoder's emphasis on the normativity of Jesus to be a good thing.

Furthermore, Yoder highly dislikes Kant because Yoder focuses on the particularity of Jesus while Kant strives for some kind of ethic known purely by reason. He also dislikes Kant for well-known reasons: Kant strives for a universal ethic knowable by reason apart from any theological basis (or so Kant thinks). Yoder holds the exact opposite with respect to epistemology: human reason has been so damaged by sin that we need God's revelation to know both who God is and who we are called to be.²⁵ In October of 1979, the decade in which he supposedly began to move away from the uniqueness of Jesus, Yoder states, "The warning of the Barmen confessor is still needed. If Jesus Christ is God's word, then no other event can be, in itself, firmly or finally either a revelation or achievement on the same level."²⁶ For Yoder, Jesus is the interpretive lens

²⁴ Peter Ochs, "Commentary," in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 40.

²⁵ For example, see Yoder, "Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May-June 1985): 2-7.

²⁶ Yoder, "Discerning the Kingdom of God in the World," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 245.

through which all reality must be viewed. In *Body Politics*, when Yoder is purportedly abandoning the particularity of Jesus, he forcefully describes the sacraments as being “derived from the redemptive work of Christ, not from some other level of the knowledge of God in unfallen creation or timeless reason.”²⁷ Yoder remains clear to the end: nothing can make sense or be understood apart from Jesus, in whom all things hold together.

Further, Martens’ argument that Yoder is neo-Kantian largely works through guilt by association. Schwarzschild advocates a neo-Kantian emphasis on ethical value as the meta-criterion for reading Torah and, even though Martens himself points out that Yoder would have rejected Schwarzschild’s method, Martens still proposes that the similarities between Yoder and Schwarzschild reveals that Yoder is also neo-Kantian (110-112). What Martens ignores is the rather obvious fact that there could have been a source other than Kant for Yoder’s emphasis on things such as ethics, a messianic age, the relation of means to ends, the priority of action over explanation, and nonviolence: namely, Yoder’s reading of Scripture, including the Old Testament.²⁸ In other words, Yoder emphasizes ethics, or *halakah*, because that is what Torah does. Moreover, as Nietzsche pointed out, Kant thinks he excises theology from ethics but he doesn’t. Kant’s ethics are dependent on the Bible and Christianity, but are re-stated in philosophical terms, and thus without the robust theological basis needed to truly make sense. If Nietzsche is right (and I

²⁷ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 76.

²⁸ For a masterful account of Yoder’s reading of the Old Testament, see John C. Nugent, *The Politics of Yahweh: John Howard Yoder, the Old Testament, and the People of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

think he is), then the reason why Schwarzschild's neo-Kantian methodology leads him to basically the same position as Yoder is not because they share Kant, but because they (and Kant, perhaps despite himself) share Scripture. Furthermore, given that Yoder repeatedly underscored the Jewishness of Jesus, it would not surprise him that he and a Jew like Schwarzschild have a great deal in common. The whole point of *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* is that Jews and Christians have far more in common than Jews and Christians often think. Yoder's holistic interpretation of the Old and New Testaments make this clear as well.²⁹

So how does Yoder view the relationship between particularity and Christianity? Ever the cosmopolitan, Yoder engages a wide range of thinkers from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds.³⁰ Convinced that Jesus is both Word and Lord, he expects to find elements of Christ's reign even among non-Christians. This does not make them Christian, nor does it mean Christians should abandon the particularity of Jesus and the church for some sort of generic Enlightenment religious liberalism. In the last years of his life, Yoder was keenly aware that some were accusing him of abandoning the particularity of Christianity. He speaks to this directly and draws a contrast between "distinctiveness" and "specificity" in order to show why this criticism is misguided: "To make 'distinctiveness' a value criterion is to measure the truth value of meaning system A in terms of the other systems (whether B or C or N or X) that happen to be around, from

²⁹ Again, see Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*.

³⁰ For example, see Yoder, "You Have It Coming: Good Punishment," in *The End of Sacrifice: The Capital Punishment Writings of John Howard Yoder*, ed. John C. Nugent (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 153-233.

which is supposed to differ [*sic*]. That is a method mistake. Some of the neighboring systems may be very much like it. Some of them may be historically derived from it, which is true of most of the post-Christian value systems in the West. To ask that Christian thought be *unique* is nonsense. What we should ask of Christian statements is that they be *specifically* or *specifiably* Christian, i.e., true to kind, authentically representing their species. Whether a specifiably Christian statement is 'distinctive' depends on the other guy. That cannot be made a criterion of authenticity."³¹ In other words, being contrarian for its own sake is not a virtue. For example, if a Christian finds non-Christians promoting relatively good patterns of peace, working against the death penalty, or advocating the importance of human dignity, should the Christian veer away from promoting these things or decry those non-Christians who do promote them? Yoder would say no, so long as the Christian is anchored in a vision of the universe centered on the Crucified and Risen Lamb. Two people or two communities can do the same action for different reasons, and Yoder wants to be sure that Christians are acting from a specifically Christian perspective (this is why, for example, Yoder catalogs the wide variety of religious reasons why people might be pacifist in *Nevertheless*). Thus Yoder anticipated Martens' critique and responded. If Yoder sometimes sounds similar to a neo-Kantian, it does not necessarily indicate that Yoder has compromised his position, but that certain biblical patterns of reasoning persist in a post-Christian culture and that human

³¹ Yoder, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (1992): 294. This same point is made in "On Not Being in Charge," in *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 177, n. 15.

beings, despite sin and the fall, still live in a cosmos whose *logos* is Jesus.

Tree 3: The Sacraments—Reality in the Church and Reflection in the World

In his final two chapters, Martens' connects the charge of neo-Kantianism to Yoder's view of the sacraments, arguing that Yoder takes a reductionistic approach to them. By getting rid of language of middle axioms and embracing the idea of the sacraments as paradigm for the world's behavior, Yoder "elides so many of the differences between the church and world" by "describing the social practices of the church as completely accessible and understandable in the world without passing through the Exodus or Pentecost" (145). For Martens, this is "the final step needed to transpose Christ's lordship over the world into a form of secular social ethics that, in 'real history,' yields a particular sociological or political position that is in no way particularly Christian" (145-46). I have criticized this view elsewhere, and I treat Yoder's view of the sacraments in the context of Yoder's broader thought in my forthcoming book, *Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder's Trinitarian Theology of Culture*.³² Martens' statements here beg for a careful re-reading of Yoder. I do not mean to sound combative but frank when I say that Martens simply reads Yoder wrong on the sacraments. He can maintain his view only by misreading certain statements of Yoder and ignoring other key statements. Not only does Yoder not give up the particularity of the church, but he continues to contrast the church and world precisely in the texts (including *Body Politics* and *For the Nations*) where

³² Forthcoming in Fall 2012 from Herald Press.

Martens thinks he is eliding the difference between the two. I will sustain this claim simply by appealing to those texts and doing my best to take Yoder straightforwardly and at his word. I think my explanation makes sense of what Martens thinks he sees, but I do not think Martens' view of the "forest" of Yoder's corpus can possibly account for the specific trees that I highlight in this section.

As always with Yoder, we must ask who his conversation partners were. What is driving him to talk about the sacraments so much during the last decade of his life? Luckily, Yoder tells us. He is trying to get beyond a false dilemma: on the one hand, "public catholics" think you have to distill anything particularly Christian out of your public discourse while, on the other hand, certain "communitarians" think that the particularity of the church and Christian ethics means that Christians have nothing to say about how a university, a town, or a factory should be run.³³ To the "public catholics," Yoder says that if postmodernism has taught us anything, it is that we all operate from some kind of provincial standpoint. The result? We can stop worrying about conforming to some broader standard. Just live Christian and talk Christian, and people will see Jesus. This way of making disciples has worked fairly well for at least two thousand years. To the communitarians, Yoder says that they risk backhandedly limiting the reign and work of Jesus.³⁴ They unwitting mirror the position of those who draw a sharp dualism between creation and redemption by saying, "I can

³³ Yoder, "The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm," *For the Nations: Essays Public & Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 49.

³⁴ Yoder clearly seems to have Stanley Hauerwas in mind here. See "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 370.

live in light of redemption in the church, but I am constrained (by something like necessity, the orders of creation, etc.) to operate in a different way in my vocation outside the church, either because that's just the way it is or because non-Christians wouldn't understand it if I called them to live as I live." This makes no sense to Yoder because Jesus is Word and Lord, which means that following him goes with the grain of the universe, no matter where you are in said universe. The "wider world" cannot dictate how to run a factory, a university, or a town, because there is no wider world than the world ruled by the Crucified Lamb.

Should a Christian in the workplace assume that "forgiveness, enemy love, and servanthood" do not apply in this sphere?³⁵ That they are for church life only? Should Christians avoid calling non-Christians to forgiveness, enemy love, and servanthood? Yoder denies all of the above. Neither would Yoder affirm that because non-Christians lack the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, then absolutely no approximation of forgiveness, enemy love, and servanthood is possible beyond the church. There is no hint of two kingdoms or two sets of norms, one derived from fallen necessity and the other from God's redemptive work. Note, Yoder is not here compromising Christian particularity, but affirming the scandal of a particularity that absorbs all other claims to universality. As Yoder puts it in describing Jews in Jeremiah's day, "Jews knew that there was no larger world than the one their Lord had made and their prophets knew the most about. Its compatibility with kinds of 'wisdom' that the Gentiles could understand seemed to them to validate their holy history rather

³⁵ Yoder, "New Humanity," 48.

than to relativize it. When Hellenism penetrated their world, they did not hesitate to affirm that whatever truth there was in Plato or Aristotle was derived from Moses."³⁶

What results from this way of life? First, if you live Christianly, people will see a difference. They may not understand why you do what you do, but just as Daniel's friends stood out in a crowd, so will Christians. In other words, though the sociologist's radar may not pick up God, it should pick up God's people. Second, this does not mean that actions alone are enough to communicate the gospel. Christians are called to actively proclaim who God is and what God has done. When Christians explain who they are and why they do what they do, they point to the God revealed in the biblical narrative.³⁷ If the message and action of God's people serve the shalom of Babylon, this does not undermine but underscore the monotheistic message.

When it comes to the sacraments, it must be noted that Yoder himself sets controls on how people should perceive his use of language that is not overtly Christian. So when he uses terms like "egalitarianism," "democracy," and "socialism" to talk about the life of the church, these should be taken as "different from their secularistic and individualistic usages."³⁸ In other words, if you think that what Yoder meant by sacramental social processes can be translated into other, non-Christian frameworks of meaning *without remainder*, then you are wrong. Yoder does mean, however, that if you begin with Jesus and the Bible, Christians can hammer extant language (such as egalitarianism, democracy, and socialism) into a

³⁶ Yoder, "See How They Go With Their Face to the Sun," in *For the Nations*, 73.

³⁷ Yoder, "See How They Go," 76.

³⁸ Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 370.

Christ-centered shape.³⁹ This proposal is neither more nor less radical than speaking of Jesus as *logos* or using the term *homoousios* to talk about the Son's relation to the Father. An analogy from theological language might help here. When we say "God is..." or "Jesus is..." we always use predicates that are in play in our own cultural context (for example, God is "omnipotent" or Jesus is a "pacifist"), but we must realize that the subject controls how we understand the predicate, not vice versa. It is a rookie theological mistake to assume, for example, that we seek to define "omnipotence" apart from what God tells us about God's power. Likewise, when Yoder says, for example, that the Eucharist implies socialism, it is the Eucharist that determines and defines the nature of what is meant by "socialism," not vice versa. In fact, far from arguing that the Christian sacrament and non-Christian social processes are simple equivalents, Yoder argues that to understand the Christian sacrament in light of conceptual frameworks that are not specifically Christian is to get the sacrament wrong. The sacraments are grounded in Scripture and must be understood as such.

But once it has been established that Jesus is the one by whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together, it naturally follows that what happens in the church will have what Yoder calls "reflections" and "spin-offs" in the world.⁴⁰ In other words, if sin is a parasite on our created nature, and if we were created to go with the grain of a universe whose *logos* is Jesus, then we should expect that what

³⁹ See Yoder, "'But We Do See Jesus': The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 46-62.

⁴⁰ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 58.

works in the Spirit-empowered church may still work, albeit to a lesser extent, outside the church. Imagine two non-Christian marriages. Is it any wonder that a non-Christian marriage in which the partners have some sense of servanthood would be relatively better than a marriage in which neither partner has any sense of servanthood? Is it any wonder that a non-Christian who forgives would be able to maintain relationships better than an unforgiving person? Yoder is simply saying that if you see something relatively good happening outside the church, it is ultimately explainable by reference to Jesus.

Given this groundwork, what does Yoder actually do with the sacraments? If we observe Yoder's texts, we see four related affirmations. As I briefly exposit Yoder's discussion of the five sacraments, watch for all four of the following facets of Yoder's work:

1. The sacraments as practiced in the church and the social processes undertaken outside the church are not simple equivalents. As noted above, you cannot translate the sacrament into non-Christian terminology without remainder.
2. The Christian sacraments are foundational and irreplaceable paradigms for any other social order that hopes to go with the grain of the universe.
3. As the church pioneers culture (in part through the sacraments), the wider world has "spin-offs" and "reflections" of the Christian community's practices. The church has no reason to deny that these better ways of life are, in fact, relatively better. They are better because they more closely approximate God's intentions and *telos* for human life, which the church knows by means of Scripture.

4. The first calling of the Christian is to participate in the life of the church, and the best way the church contributes to the world is through its particular Jesus-centered gospel message and life together. Yet the church also has no reason to avoid non-Christian linguistic frameworks that may call non-Christians to more closely approximate God's intentions for human life.

At the end of "Firstfruits," Yoder references Revelation 5 to underscore that Christians are called to be a priestly kingdom. The priestly metaphor is an apt one, because priests are both *set apart from* the broader community and *set apart for* the broader community. The way to be *for* the nations is by being purposefully and distinctively Christian, as Yoder forcefully states at the end of *Body Politics*: "A church that is not 'against the world' in fundamental ways has nothing worth saying to and for the world. Conversion and separation are not the way to become otherworldly; they are the only way to be present, relevantly and redemptively, in the midst of things."⁴¹ Yoder does not forsake particularity or distinctiveness but he argues that the particularity of the church does *not* mean irrelevance. Why? Because, as noted above, the church lives from the vision of the Crucified Lamb in Revelation 5. The Christian can be unashamed of the gospel, recognizing that the real world is the world of Revelation 5—a world in which the Suffering Servant is proclaimed the King of Kings—not some "wider world" that determines ahead of time what does or does not count as intelligible, relevant, or public.⁴²

⁴¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 78.

⁴² Yoder, *Body Politics*, 74.

The first sacrament is baptism, which Yoder highlights as introducing a new order in which Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, have been reconciled to each other.⁴³ This is a gospel truth, Yoder says, that has reached even beyond the church. But notice that Yoder does not claim that one can just translate this into what the non-Christian means by “egalitarianism” or respect for “cultural diversity” in a straightforward or simplistic way.⁴⁴ True respect, equality, and dignity are terms that, ultimately, cannot be sustained in a worldview cut free from the specificity of Christian baptism. As Yoder notes, “the equality of all people as they are created certainly is not self-evident.”⁴⁵ In other words, only Christians know the basis for equality, fraternity, and democracy, and it is not a generic respect for people or human dignity; it is a recognition of who God is and what he has done in Jesus.

The second sacrament is binding and loosing—including conflict resolution and moral discernment—which Yoder likewise roots in the gospel and presence of the Holy Spirit. Though the presence of the Spirit is crucial to the church living this out,⁴⁶ those beyond the church can also see the importance of forgiveness even if they do not know the *logos* who created the grain of the universe. Although forgiveness might be explained so as to make sense in a variety of worldviews, Yoder is clear that Hannah Arendt, Rene Girard, and others can emphasize forgiveness, ultimately, because of Jesus, who is the ontological and epistemological key to reality. Yoder does not deny that forgiveness can take place outside the church. Rather,

⁴³ Yoder, “Firstfruits,” 29.

⁴⁴ Yoder, “Firstfruits,” 30.

⁴⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 35.

⁴⁶ Yoder, “Firstfruits,” 30; *Body Politics*, 8-9.

he argues that because this “is true in the gospel; it is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, in the world.”⁴⁷ The “*mutatis mutandis*” in the sentence is key, because this Latin phrase means “changing the things needing to be changed.” It indicates that two things are analogous, but not identical or similar. This is important because it indicates that Yoder recognizes that conflict resolution will be practiced differently in the church and the world. In other words, forgiveness is not understood or practiced in the world the same way as in the church; this is why he points out that forgiveness generally remains scandalous and impossible for the world, especially for those who hold the most power.⁴⁸ Whereas Yoder sees the social practices of the church as open for the world to “observe, imitate, and extrapolate,”⁴⁹ Martens misses the fact that Yoder equally sees that they will always do this *as the world*, i.e., without the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, without Scripture, etc. But this does not mean that any talk of forgiveness is *absurd* or *unintelligible* to the broader world or that social scientists might not pick up on the idea. This is not an all-or-nothing game, not least because Jesus instructed his followers to act as a salt-like preservative in the broader world. So when the world sees an Amish community forgive a murderous gunman, they see that something strange is going on and can recognize the power of God at work, even if they lack the language or framework to fully grasp it. The world can even approximate these practices, but this provides no grounds for thinking that this somehow displaces the particularity of the church, at least not for Yoder.

⁴⁷ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 13.

⁴⁸ Yoder, “Firstfruits,” 31.

⁴⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 75.

Yoder also considers the Lord's Supper and its rootage in a common meal. Note that Yoder does not reduce this meal to *nothing more than* a common meal or economic sharing. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Yoder highlights at least 11 layers of meaning to this meal.⁵⁰ Similarly, in "New Humanity," he highlights the more traditional aspects of the meal, including remembrance of Christ's death and hope for his triumphant return.⁵¹ In his lecture on "The Eucharist and Economics" at Holden Village, Yoder again insists that his point is not to reject what is understood as the traditional meaning of the Lord's Supper, but to focus on the Supper as a meal, with all that meals entailed in the life of the early church.⁵² He also rightly notes that the basic act of sharing a meal is an economic practice that says something about the worldview of the table participants, namely, that they are called to economic solidarity in Christ.

Here I note one textual point that is significant, but misunderstood by Martens. In discussing the Lord's Supper and economic sharing in "Firstfruits," Yoder states that "to make such [economic] sharing seem natural, it helps to have gone through an exodus or Pentecost together, but neither the substance nor the pertinence of the vision is dependent on a particular faith."⁵³ This sentence must be taken in the context of both this essay and Yoder's other clear statements elsewhere on this topic. Unfortunately, Martens takes the latter half of this sentence and applies it to the sacraments as a whole, which leads him to conclude that the sacraments are not-so-particular

⁵⁰ See Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn," 182-183.

⁵¹ Yoder, "New Humanity," 44; *Body Politics*, 20.

⁵² http://www.hvsvc.net/audio/01_Yo%20%201988-07.mp3 (accessed Feb. 29, 2012). For this point, listen especially from 56 minutes onward.

⁵³ Yoder, "Firstfruits," 32.

after all. This is a misreading for at least two reasons. First, Yoder is talking about *economic sharing* in this sentence and not defining the totality of what the Lord's Supper means. Surely Martens would not dispute that non-Christians can have some degree of economic solidarity. Secondly, this sentence is discussing what makes economic sharing *seem natural*, not what makes economic sharing in general possible, what makes the specifically Christian practice of the Lord's Supper possible, or the various layers of meaning in the Lord's Supper. On this score, Martens' interpretation of what Yoder said simply doesn't fit with what he actually says in this sentence or elsewhere.

So what can the church say to the world about economic justice? Yoder notes that Christians use a variety of terms, including "the epistemological privilege of the oppressed or cooperation or equal opportunity or socialism."⁵⁴ Is Yoder saying that all of these translate without remainder the meaning of the Lord's Supper? No. In fact, he references his discussion of this in *Body Politics* where he clarifies that, without a biblical foundation, these translations of "economic justice" fail to capture what the Bible means. Instead, he insists that terms such as "economic democracy," "socialism," "taking the side of the poor," "social justice," "rights," or "responsibility for human needs" are all insufficient as self-enclosed or self-describing realities and cannot operate independently of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, which Yoder calls the "center" for any vision of economic solidarity.⁵⁵ In other words, the Lord's Supper is not simply *a* paradigm, it is *the* irreplaceable paradigm. In arguing that the non-Christian

⁵⁴ Yoder, "Firstfruits," 32.

⁵⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 22.

world might “observe, imitate, and extrapolate” from Christian practices, Yoder is not somehow suggesting that these sub-Christian practices are equal to the Lord's Supper and can somehow replace it; he is suggesting that the Lord's Supper is the indispensable foundation for these imitative practices. Far from diminishing Christian particularity, Yoder is saying that Christians who try to make sense of economic justice *apart from the church's particular practice of the Lord's Supper*, including its economic aspect, will ultimately fall short. Why? Because a generic vision of economic justice lacks its transcendent anchor and source, namely, the Crucified Lamb who gave himself for us that we might freely give to one another.

The fourth practice is the rule of Paul or open meeting. Drawn from 1 Corinthians 14, the thrust of this practice is that all members of the assembled congregation are given the opportunity to speak and listen to one another. Yoder notes that this is not an idealistic view that simply affirms each person's wisdom and creativity; it is grounded in trust in the Holy Spirit, which has been given to each member. Nevertheless, this does not limit the world's ability to see and approximate this practice. Indeed, Yoder points to historian A. D. Lindsay who argues that the practices of Anglo-Saxon democracy are linked to the specifically Christian practice of open assembly, which recognizes the freedom of all to speak in the church's gathering.⁵⁶ This does not mean that democracy as practiced by non-Christians is the simple equivalent to the Spirit-led dialogue of the church. Nevertheless, the Christian can promote dialogue outside the church because of the conviction that “in the age of Jesus the Messiah, the healing

⁵⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 67.

resources of his ministry can by the nature of things reach" beyond the Christian community.⁵⁷ This move does not elide the church/world distinction, but reinforces it. Inside the church, we know what we do and we know why we do it: because the Messiah has come and poured out his Spirit. Outside the church, we can encourage dialogue even for those who do not confess Jesus as Lord precisely because we know Jesus is both Word and Lord. Do they have the same resources of the Christian community? Of course not, but that does not mean there is some other norm or *telos* for how humans should function. The only norm is God's kingdom as presented in Scripture and embodied (albeit imperfectly) in the life of the church. So Christians should call non-Christians to greater dialogue with their enemies, even if they initially do so in "thinner" terms that are not specifically Christian.⁵⁸

The fifth and final practice Yoder highlights is the universality of giftedness, or the "fullness of Christ." The theological ground for this practice is the ascended Jesus pouring out the power and presence of his Spirit, who gifts and equips each member of the body for the building up of the whole.⁵⁹ But isn't this focus on the multiplicity of gifts simply a first-century, Pauline view of the modern idea of teamwork and division of labor? Yoder disagrees. The universality of giftedness in the church depends on the ascension of Christ, as Paul argues in Ephesians 4.⁶⁰ As a result, this practice must not be equated with modern notions of teamwork or Western individualism. Without Jesus' ascension, there is no sacrament.

⁵⁷ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 69.

⁵⁸ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 69.

⁵⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 48-49.

⁶⁰ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 48.

Further, Paul's vision of organic interdependence is not reducible to non-biblical terms like individualism or collectivism.⁶¹ Again, Yoder denies simplistic equivalency between the Christian sacrament and its *extra ecclesiam* analogs.

With this sacrament in particular, Yoder explains quite clearly how practices in the church and world relate in analogous, *not identical* ways. As Yoder states, "The modern notions of teamwork, which I argued above are not the source of Paul's vision, are in fact reflections or spin-offs from it...It enables the factory system, the research team, the university, and the city. It explains why factories and businesses where every worker participates in policy making and quality control can make better automobiles or sell more software than those whose organization is vertical."⁶² Again, Yoder underscores that there are not two norms, one for the church and one for the autonomous world, and that the church's practices are foundational and anchored in Christ. Yoder later adds that dialogue in the Spirit is the "ground floor" of democracy and that binding and loosing is the "foundation" for any conflict resolution.⁶³ Yet one is not free to reverse the order and deduce that the "rule of Paul" and "democracy" are equivalent. Yoder is clear about that. This comports with his view of the church as "pioneering" culture.⁶⁴ It may surprise those who focus only on his critique of Constantinianism to learn that Yoder claimed that the church has been doing this pioneering work for a long time and has produced numerous "reflections" and "spin-offs" throughout the centuries, including institutions like hospitals,

⁶¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 49.

⁶² Yoder, *Body Politics*, 58.

⁶³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 72.

⁶⁴ Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 373.

public education, and social work. Because the church lives in and into the new creation, this affects the world as well as the church. But it does not (and at no point does Yoder) conflate church and world.

How then should Christians view these “reflections” and “spin-offs” of the church’s pioneering practices? Yoder’s view of capital punishment is a helpful case study on this point, precisely because it spans his career, it is beyond the scope of the sacraments, and it illustrates Yoder’s methodology.⁶⁵ First, if liberals, humanists, and Jews oppose the death penalty in terms other than creation and cross, this does not count against the Christian position, as though Christian “distinctiveness” meant that the Christian position has to be absolutely unique.⁶⁶ The believer has clear Christian reasons for opposing the death penalty; if others have other reasons, that is fine too. Second, the gospel has produced humanizing effects in Western culture, even beyond the church, a fact seen in increasing opposition to the death penalty in Western history. Third, Yoder carefully defines this humanization. We should not simplistically equate it with the gospel, but nor should we pretend that the new creation has not entered history and therefore affects the thoughts, practices, and institutions of unbelievers. According to Yoder, the humanization of culture that happens in the wake of the church “is not the same as the salvation of individual souls, nor is it the same as the praise of God in gatherings for worship, nor is it the same as the coming of the ultimate kingdom of God, but it is a fruit of the gospel for which we should be

⁶⁵ For a good summary of the book, see John C. Nugent’s article at <http://www.walkandword.com/writings/index.php?id=13>.

⁶⁶ Yoder, “Against the Death Penalty,” in *End of Sacrifice*, 125.

grateful, and for whose furtherance we are responsible. The fact that persons believing in other value systems share in the humanization process, and that some of them may overvalue it as if it could do away with evil, is no reason for followers of Jesus to disavow it or leave it to unbelievers to carry out."⁶⁷ Although Yoder underscores Christian participation in these extra-ecclesial processes, we would do well to note that the Scripture-guided church remains the center of what God is doing and the center for knowing how God is doing it.

Moreover, in 1991, Yoder notes that the tide had begun to turn and that American culture was becoming more vengeful, not less. How does Yoder respond to this resurgence in the death penalty and calls for vengeance? He could appeal to ethical reasoning, he notes, "since ethics is also theology."⁶⁸ But, instead, he moves to the language of faith, doxology, and the Apostles' creed.⁶⁹ Why? The instinct toward retribution cannot be argued away; "enlightenment" is really just suppression. The proper response, for Yoder, is celebrating the Crucified Lamb and remembering the shed blood of Jesus, who is the end of sacrifice.⁷⁰ How does the church make the world less violent, less vengeful? Not by trying to "enlighten" people out of their retributive reflex, but by proclaiming that Jesus paid it all, and all to him we owe.

Far from sacrificing the particularity of Jesus or the church, Yoder continues to emphasize the slogan, "Let the church be the church." Do you care about the world's shalom as well as that of the church? If so, Yoder tells you (in 1996, a

⁶⁷ Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," in *End of Sacrifice*, 126.

⁶⁸ Yoder, "A Theological Critique of Violence," in *War of the Lamb*, 38.

⁶⁹ Yoder, "A Theological Critique of Violence," 38-41.

⁷⁰ Yoder, "Against the Death Penalty," 132-133.

year before he died) that your first step should not be the neo-Constantinianism of Jim Wallis or Jim Dobson, but a focus on the life of the church: “Seek first the righteousness of the kingdom, and the rest will be thrown in’, is a recipe not for poverty but for plenty. It may be similar when we ask how the value-laden sub-community goes about caring about justice in the wider society. It may be the case not only by happenstance but by a deep inner logic, if God is God, that the sub-community’s fidelity to its own vocation will ‘contribute to state policy’ more strongly – and certainly more authentically – than if they worried about just how and why to go about compromising their principles in order to be effective.”⁷¹ The more Christians forgive one another, the more forgiveness will be seen as a viable path for human flourishing. The more Christians share material goods with one another, the more economic sharing will be seen as viable economics.

Does this encourage Christians to abandon the church for involvement in more generic attempts at social justice? By no means. At the end of *Body Politics*, a text in which Yoder has supposedly elided the difference between church and world, Yoder closes by noting the sharp *contrast* between church and world: “A church that is not ‘against the world’ in fundamental ways has nothing worth saying to and for the world.”⁷² Moreover, Yoder states that, while Christians and non-Christians alike may agree with various points he has made, he sees his unique contribution as “the conception that the Christian social ethical witness must be defined not by independence from the witness of the faith community but by

⁷¹ Yoder, “On Not Being in Charge,” 175.

⁷² Yoder, *Body Politics*, 78.

its derivation therefrom.”⁷³ That is why the subtitle of *Body Politics* is not “generic ways that any human can behave” but “practices of the Christian community before the watching world.” The church’s message and life together are central, from beginning to end in Yoder’s thought, because it is the church who is equipped by the Spirit to pioneer the way into the new age, living from Christ’s victory. The way that Christians truly contribute to the world is not by living on the world’s terms, but by going “about the business of being Christian, proclaiming the Gospel, modeling an exemplary community life, and praying for all people,”⁷⁴ knowing that there is nothing more real or more foundational to reality than the good news that Christ died, was buried, rose again on the third day, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.⁷⁵ What proclamation could be more public, evangelical, or orthodox than that?

Conclusion

At the end of the day, what has *The Heterodox Yoder* added to conversation? Martens can certainly be commended for his broader efforts to edit and publish collections of Yoder’s work, including *Nonviolence: A Brief History* and *Revolutionary Christianity*. This book may also be commended for highlighting previously unpublished works on Christology and foregrounding Yoder’s correspondence with Schwarzschild. Although Martens only hints at this on the last page of his book, I suspect that his own experience of Anabaptism may be shaping his intense desire to avoid reductionism, a desire that I wholeheartedly affirm. In that sense, I think Martens and I are

⁷³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 78.

⁷⁴ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 44.

⁷⁵ See Yoder, *Body Politics*, 74.

on the same page (and I think Yoder is with us, although Martens does not). Yet, I am afraid that he is laying either too much blame or too much credit—depending on your point of view—at Yoder’s feet. As I noted earlier, I frequently encounter non-Mennonites (scholars and otherwise) who have simplistic and confused ideas about what Yoder thought, and I am afraid that Martens’ book only confuses rather than clarifies things, in part, because Martens does not account for the “whole forest” of Yoder’s corpus. Martens’ thesis simply does not do justice to the nuanced position of Yoder’s texts, such as *Body Politics*, “Sacrament as Social Process,” and essays in *For the Nations*. In that sense, Martens’ reading of Yoder is analogous not to heterodoxy but to heresy. I am not accusing Martens of doctrinal heresy. But heresies are, in my view, deficient in part because they cannot explain the totality of the biblical text. Arius emphasized the humanity of Jesus, but could not account satisfactorily for texts like John 1; Athanasius and others could. The doctrine of Jesus’ two natures is orthodoxy precisely because it makes the best sense of the totality of the texts in Scripture. Analogously, the picture of Yoder one gets from Martens is simply not the totality of Yoder—not even the totality of his crucial texts on the sacraments.

So I simply appeal to the reader to return to Yoder’s texts and read them more closely than ever. Does he make the sacraments of the church and the social processes of the world equivalent to each other, or does he see the social processes of the world as reflections and spin-offs of the life-giving practices of the public body that is the church? Does Yoder abandon the uniqueness of Jesus as a historical person and the definitive revelation of God, or does he affirm that Jesus being Word and Lord is the only viable explanation for anything good, whether

in the church or the world? Is Yoder driven by the neo-Kantian impulse to reduce theology to ethics, or does Yoder assume that ethics and theology, politics and doxology are always already connected? Does Yoder claim that the new creation, the messianic age, and the Crucified Lamb are metaphors that may or may not truly have meaning independent of their ability to be translated into the “ethical” orientation of “practical reason,” or does Yoder think that there is no truer way to talk about reality than the new creation, the messianic age, and the Crucified Lamb? Does Yoder think you can just translate away the particularity of biblical faith? Yoder himself poses and answers this question, and I will give him the last word: “Is there anything nonnegotiable in the dispersed minority’s witness? Anything untranslatable? Of course there is; it is that there is no other God. The rejection not only of pagan cult but also of every way of putting their own YHWH/Lord in the same frame of reference with pagan deities, not even speaking the divine NAME as others would, was tied for the Jews in Babylon with the proclamation of his sovereignty over creation and history. There is no setting into which that deconstructing, disenchanting proclamation cannot be translated, none which can encompass it. That anti-idolatry message is not bad but good news.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Yoder, “See How They Go,” 76-77.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Branson Parler is Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Kuyper College. He received his PhD from Calvin Theological Seminary.