

Yoder, Sex Abuse, & War

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Photograph of John Howard Yoder, by Carolyn Prieb. Source: Mennonite Church USA Archives - Goshen, IN, via Flickr.

This journal was founded partly to counter the ongoing pacifist influence of John Howard Yoder (1927-97), the highly influential Mennonite theologian whose 1972 book *The Politics of Jesus* redefined Christ's crucifixion as a rejection of all violence and "empire." Still unfolding revelations about Yoder's sexual exploitation of students and religious devotees, numbering at least 100 women, are compelling some of his admirers now to question his legacy.

In unpublished responses, Yoder justifies these sexual encounters theologically, citing touching between Jesus and women in His day. He also admits disdaining the "consensus of our respectable culture," and believes there is greater latitude in sexual standards in the church's new revolutionary

age. Of course, Yoder's view contravenes historical Christian teaching about the human body and marriage. As a husband and father, his behavior across decades was adulterous, among many other problems, and amid the #MeToo campaign would today be called a gross abuse of his authority as a teacher and

pastor. His theological justifications for these encounters are at very least false teaching, if not heretical.

Reinterpreting the crucifixion as primarily a rejection of violence—rather than atonement for sin, which Yoder calls "hocus-pocus"—is in my view

decidedly heretical. Traditional Anabaptist thought, whose understanding of the cross is orthodox, requires pacifism of individuals and communities called to nonviolence, but the theology does not dispute the state's vocation for violence through its police and military functions. Yoder, who studied under Karl Barth after World War II and observed Europe's postwar destruction, universalizes the Mennonite message to pacifism for all Christians, societies, and even governments.

Any cursory glance at today's Christian blogosphere and social media will quickly evince Yoder's pervasive impact. Fidelity to Jesus entails abjuring all coercive force and political power. Dissenters from this perspective are compromised Constantinians who serve empire over God. Followers of Yoder's perspective typically are not consistent. They usually demand the state provide for the poor, protect the environment, enforce non-discrimination, and make other pledges. But they refuse to acknowledge their agenda definitionally requires coercion. Their expectation that government should renounce all lethal force is utopian and ultimately renders their viewpoint politically irrelevant.

Yoderism's incoherence and irrelevance have confined it largely to Christian elites in academia, activism, and chattering spheres, especially among left-leaning Evangelicals and post-Evangelicals. Shane Claiborne of The Simple Way movement and author of *Jesus for President* (2008) is a leading Yoderite activist. Greg Boyd of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and author of *Myth of a Christian Nation* (2007) and, his latest work, *The Crucifixion of the*

Warrior God: Volumes 1 & 2 (2017) is another leading exponent. So too is Brian Zahnd of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, whose latest book is *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* (2017).

By far, Yoderism's most well-known follower and popularizer is Stanley Hauerwas, now semi-retired at Duke Divinity School. Still enormously influential, his best-known book is *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (1989). Hauerwas was a disciple and friend to Yoder, whose rise to prominence was aided by Hauerwas facilitating his move to the University of Notre Dame from Goshen Biblical Seminary. In a recent and lengthy review of troubling revelations about Yoder, Hauerwas writes in *ABC Religion and Ethics*:

I had no idea that John's engagement in his "experimentation" was so extensive both in terms of time and the number of women he seems to have involved. I am not sure, moreover, if I ever recognized how troubling it is that John refused to acknowledge that his views about what is possible between brothers and sisters in Christ were just wrong.

In the 1990s, after revelations of Yoder's misconduct, Hauerwas along with fellow anti-violence theologian Glen Stassen of Fuller Seminary encouraged Yoder to cooperate with a Mennonite church disciplinary process. Yoder cooperated only reluctantly and seems to have continued his misconduct afterward. In his 2010 memoir *Hannah's Child*, Hauerwas minimizes Yoder's

sexual scandal, and he recently admits:

I was too anxious to have John resume his place as one of the crucial theologians of our time. I thought I knew what was going on, but in fact I did not have a clue. In my defence—and it is not a very good defence—I think it is true that I simply did not understand what was going on. However, in truth, I probably did not want to know what was going on.

Hauerwas naturally struggles with the extent to which Yoder's misconduct discredits his theology: "I do not want what he has taught us about how we should and can live as Christians and how we think theologically to be lost." And: "We cannot avoid the question of whether his justification for his sexual behaviour is structurally similar to his defence of Christian nonviolence."

Quoting critics of Yoder, Hauerwas writes:

They conclude that given Yoder's configuration of Christian discipleship as nonviolence and the kingdom of God with the church's peaceableness, it is "unclear how he, given his behaviors (even if occasional), could consider himself faithful as a disciple of Christ or as a witness of the church." A judgement I find hard to deny.

"As one deeply shaped by and beholden to what John has taught me," Hauerwas writes, "what I think is missing in John's theology is quite simple[:]...insight and wisdom about learning to live well as a human being."

Although Hauerwas agonizes over Yoder and the “relation between morality and the intellectual life,” he ultimately decides that unlike others who no longer recommend Yoder’s works, “I need John’s clarity of thought if I am to try to think through what I think I have learned from him.”

Quoting another friend of Yoder, Hauerwas observes, “there is simply no way to tell the story of 20th century historic peace church theology—much less to appropriate it—without drawing on Yoder’s thought.” Hauerwas adds: “Nor do I see how we can do without him.”

Hauerwas is correct to surmise that his project of redefining Christianity as a wholly pacifist project that inconsistently rejects empire while still demanding its benefits depends inextricably upon Yoder, who’s

too valuable to abandon. He asks: “Does the immorality of a person invalidate what they have had to say?” And his answer is no.

But the challenge of Yoder is far more complicated than his sexual misconduct. Although he, as Hauerwas does, championed the church as the supreme polity, Yoder was an ultra-Protestant American individualist who boldly stepped outside the church’s traditions and teachings to proclaim new, contrary truths. Millennia of understanding about war and peace, about government and power, were jettisoned in favor of his new, preferred reality. Junking Christian teachings about marriage and the human body were only parcel to this project and should not be shocking. Yoder’s unpublished theological justifications for his sexual misconduct of women indicate that he

was not just esoteric but kooky, not dissimilar to charlatan televangelists or Eastern swamis who cloak their exploitation in sham spirituality.

Hauerwas has built a career on Yoder’s theological malpractice, so his reluctance late in life to reconsider is humanly understandable. But others who are younger and less invested should watch and learn from Yoder’s imbroglio. Our project at *Providence* is not to ramble as solitary, actualized individuals but instead to rediscover together the riches that the Body of Christ corporately has to offer on political power and global statecraft. We believe this journey will be far more rewarding. [P](#)

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