

6

Yoder's Patience and/with Derrida's *Différance*

PETER C. BLUM

“Have patience; have patience; don't be in such a hurry.
When you are impatient, you only start to worry.
Remember, remember, that God is patient too, and
Think of all the times that others have to wait for you!”

—Music Machine, “Patience (Herbert the Snail)”¹

Is this a test?
It has to be. Otherwise I can't go on.
Draining patience. drain vitality . . .

But I'm still right here, giving blood and keeping faith.
I'm gonna wait it out . . .

If there were no desire to heal
The damaged and broken met along this tedious
path I've chosen here,
I certainly would've walked away by now . . .

And I still may.
Be patient.

—Tool, “The Patient”²

1. This song is from an album originally released in 1977 entitled *Music Machine: The Fruit of the Spirit* (sound recording) (Original record label: Candle; Compact Disc released in 1998 by BCI).

2. Tool, “The Patient,” on *Lateralus* (sound recording) (BMG / Volcano / Pavement

I

The two sets of song lyrics with which I open these ruminations are separated in time by about a quarter of a century. They are separated in mood—or perhaps we should say “attitude”—by a distance not so easily measurable. One is a children’s song that has been sung in countless Bible School sessions since the late 1970s. The other is a recent song by a so-called “alternative” rock band, the sort of band whose compact discs are often decorated with stickers warning parents of “explicit” content, or in some cases have had alternate packaging in plain white in order to qualify morally for the bins at Wal-Mart. Both songs are about patience, and I call attention to them here because my central theme is patience.

Patience means waiting; being good and waiting your turn. Being patient means lacking, sitting uneasily in some “not-yet.” Being patient means being like God. Being patient means waiting for God.

Being a patient means healing, being cared-for, being cured. Being a patient means hurting, waiting for treatment, waiting for the antibiotics to kick in, waiting for morning when we can call the doctor again. Being a patient means—to reverse T. S. Eliot’s simile—being “etherized upon a table” like the “evening . . . spread out against the sky.”³

I want to talk about patience, but I am impatient to do so. I am impatient with patience. This is a tension that I would like to focus on. I don’t want us to feel it in order to make it go away. I want us to focus on it precisely so that we can feel it more clearly, more acutely.

That I wish to explore patience with simultaneous reference to John Howard Yoder and to Jacques Derrida could be considered comparable to playing a compact disc on which there are both lighthearted Bible School songs and angry electric thrashing. Even well beyond the boundaries of his own confessional community, Yoder was (and remains, via his work) a respected Christian theologian, known for his life-long insistence that following Jesus Christ in life is a real possibility. Jacques Derrida, though he is probably the most famous living philosopher, is vilified at least as often as he is lauded. One might say that he is

/ CZ, 2001). The notes credit all songwriting collectively to Tool (Danny Carey, Justin Chancellor, Adam Jones, and Maynard James Keenan).

3. T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963) 3.

the Marilyn Manson of contemporary Western intellectual life. Yoder and Derrida may not seem to have much in common at first glance. But I would suggest that it is important for us to trace the way in which the apparent tension between them might give way to tension *within* the thought of each, and that this same tension might serve rather than hinder us if we allow it into our own thinking.

Consider some similarities between Yoder and Derrida. Both make claims that seem wildly incredible from the perspective of the academic orthodoxies that they challenge. As if Yoder's being a *pacifist* is not sufficient to brand him as an unreasonable extremist, he audaciously claims more generally that Jesus not only *should* be, but in fact *can* be normative for Christian ethics—*pace* academic assumptions about how contemporary biblical scholarship makes this difficult or even impossible.⁴ His advocacy for a church that visibly embodies a radical social alternative, when not rejected as morally and politically problematic, seems downright utopian. Derrida similarly irritates his academic colleagues with apparently ludicrous claims that speaking derives from writing rather than vice-versa, or that the meaning of words is “undecidable,” and even that there is nothing “outside texts.” Because of the apparent extremity of their claims, both Yoder and Derrida have widely elicited academic responses which amount to summary dismissal. Yoder's “sectarian” ethic seems at best irresponsible, and at worst separatist and quietist. Derrida's “deconstructionism” apparently undermines meaning in general, hence undermining our ability to say anything meaningful about morality (among other things), but also (thank goodness!!) undermining itself. We may concede that they are brilliant rhetoricians, but inasmuch as they make any specific claims, they need not be taken very seriously.

There is a clear sense, of course, in which these sorts of reactions both to Yoder and to Derrida are waning recently, and they are both treated with increasing seriousness—not only by such inbred groups as Mennonites and deconstructionists, but by the scholarly mainstream. To those of us who are more favorably disposed to either or both, this is surely a welcome development. Or is it? Both Yoder and Derrida, despite their own deep distrust of and warnings about systematizing, are

4. This is presented by Yoder as one of the central theses of *The Politics of Jesus* (1st ed.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972; 2nd ed.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

increasingly the subjects of scholarly commentary geared toward exposing the implicit systems that presumably bind together their various writings, just waiting for the careful expositor to render them as series of explicit propositions. Nancey Murphy provides a succinct statement of the tendency that I have in mind here:

Yoder disclaimed being a systematic theologian. He believed (rightly, I think) that theology should be written in the service of the church, addressing issues as they arise, and not driven by any philosophical or systematic motivations. However, this perspective on the nature of theology does not prevent others from looking at Yoder's many writings and perceiving the organization and coherence of the whole.⁵

Murphy's observation here is clearly correct in a broad sense. "Anti-system" thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have been endlessly summarized and presented in very systematic ways. This seems not only natural, but in fact unavoidable. Murphy's own discussion of Yoder using the Lakatosian notion of a "research program" is in fact quite suggestive and useful. I have no doubt that the same heuristic would prove fruitful if applied to Derrida's writings.

I will not argue that systematizing either Yoder or Derrida is simply an *error*. Indeed, insofar as my discussion here involves an attempt somehow to think Yoder and Derrida together, I am quite sure that it will not escape being systematic in some relevant sense. Assuming, however (following Foucault) that "everything is dangerous,"⁶ my impulse is to look for the *danger* in systematizing them, which is not the same thing as looking for an *error*. Yoder himself has told us: "[O]nce we have learned how the word-spinners mislead us, we must also recognize that their skills are the only ones we have with which to defend ourselves against their temptations."⁷ I will employ a bit of system in

5. Nancey Murphy, "John Howard Yoder's Systematic Defense of Christian Pacifism," 45–68 in Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation, eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Reprinted as chapter 3 in this volume.

6. Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 343. See my discussion of this in connection with Yoder in Peter C. Blum, "Foucault, Genealogy, Anabaptism: Confessions of an Errant Postmodernist." Reprinted as chapter 5 in this volume.

7. John Howard Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism,"

order to suggest that we should remain deeply suspicious of system. The bit of system that I plan to use is the one with which I began: *patience*. I would like to take up the idea of patience, as it figures in the posthumous essay by Yoder included in his *Festschrift*,⁸ and treat it temporarily as if it were a key with which I can systematically unlock some doors into Yoder's distrust of system.

In Derrida's terms, I intend to use the notion of patience *strategically*. Derrida himself characterizes *différance* "as the *strategic* note or connection—relatively or provisionally *privileged*—which indicates the closure of presence. . . ."⁹ Strategic use of a "word" or a "concept" (*différance* is neither, for Derrida) does not imply that it is some sort of Archimedean point, either ontologically or epistemologically. It is privileged *provisionally* for the purposes of a specific inquiry.

II

If we follow Derrida's lead and recall that his own use of "*différance*" in the essay so titled is strategic, it will provide us with something of a point of reference from which to consider patience as strategic as well.¹⁰ Derrida's early work focused on a general critique of what he called (following Heidegger) "the metaphysics of presence." This was carried out, first of all, in a careful analysis of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory of meaning. "Presence" in that context may be understood roughly as the sort of presence before consciousness that had already been Descartes' ideal, an indubitable clarity and distinctness that could

in Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 77–90, at 85.

8. John Howard Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute'?" in Hauerwas et al., *Wisdom of the Cross*, 24–42

9. Jacques Derrida, "*Différance*," in Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996) 441–49, at 441; Derrida's emphasis.

10. It is worth noting how difficult it is for us to do so now. Derrida's fame has given rise to what can only be considered an industry in secondary literature, and various terms in Derrida's strategic lexicon have been transformed into static keys for systematic locks, "*différance*" being one of the most commonly discussed. It may require a considerable effort to think of the use of a term as *provisional* when it has solidified into an established chunk of academic jargon.

serve as a sure epistemic foundation. Derrida attacked this notion by juxtaposing it with the general understanding of signs that emerged from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Regardless of what details of Saussure's views have or have not been taken up by subsequent linguistics or semiotics, Derrida rightly emphasizes the broad-based acceptance of his two central insights, namely, (i) the *arbitrariness* of signs, and (ii) the *differential* character of signs. Both insights are nicely captured in Derrida's phrasing: "The elements of signification function not by virtue of the compact force of their cores but by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another."¹¹ An individual sign does not have meaning all by itself, in isolation from other signs; meaning is in the differences between signs, and the differences between signs in one sign system need not map directly onto those of another sign system.

That signs do not mean by themselves individually entails that the meanings of signs are never simply "present" in the Cartesian/Husserlian sense. "[T]he movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume it or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of it."¹² This is precisely what leads Derrida to deploy the term *différance*:

[T]he signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then—*différance*—is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general.¹³

The differences that constitute meaning in a language, though they are clearly arbitrary, have not simply "fallen from the sky," as Derrida says.¹⁴ They must have a cause, we would assume; they must have come from "somewhere." The problem is that there is no "somewhere" that we can point to from which they might have come but which itself lies beyond or outside of the play of differences. If a meaning could be in-

11. Derrida, "*Différance*," 448.

12. *Ibid.*, 447.

13. *Ibid.*, 449.

14. *Ibid.*

tuitied clearly and distinctly in the way that Descartes or Husserl would like, then according to Saussure's view, *it could not in fact be a meaning!* An "intuition" of meaning would always already have entered into the play of differences. If presence were required in order to make sense of a cause, "we would therefore have to talk about an effect without a cause, something that would very quickly lead to no longer talking about effects."¹⁵ Derrida's approach here is, by his own admission, a discursive move akin to negative theology.¹⁶ He "defines" *différance* as "the movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences."¹⁷ *Différance* is emphatically not God, but the non-word "*différance*" does not denote in basically the same way that "God" does not denote according to the apophatic tradition. The terms of his "definition" are used not in their traditional metaphysical senses, he tells us, but "out of strategic convenience."

The sense in which all of this remains *provisional* is precisely the sense in which it all remains wedded to a particular beginning. The beginning, stated much too simplistically, is still his juxtaposition of principles drawn from phenomenology and structuralist semiotics. The point is not that Derrida has somehow created a *new* beginning; even less that he has somehow either surpassed all beginnings, or found THE beginning. Derrida's project, rather, is to grab hold of some of the main resources of the scaffolding on which we have arranged our thinking, and to shake them vigorously, to make them rattle. This is my reading of what Derrida generally calls "deconstruction" (though that word has been so thoroughly "terminologized" that it is even less capable of serving as a disruptive "non-word" than "*différance*").

Derrida's general approach here (especially under that notorious name) has often been understood as leading directly to some sort of "nihilism," i.e., as undermining our ability successfully to mean anything that we say, or to say anything that we mean, or something equally hideous.¹⁸ Recent work both by and about Derrida has fortunately miti-

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 444.

17. Derrida, "*Différance*," 450.

18. Dismissal of Derrida as a nihilist is most often based, I would argue, on superficial (if any) reading of his work. It must be stated, however, that some careful and

gated such worries to some extent. Unlike some of his more excitable readers, Derrida has never assumed that deconstruction constitutes some sort of straightforward *refutation* of any particular point of view. His concern is apparently that our general way of embracing *any* point of view is problematic, at least insofar as it is haunted by the expectation of *presence*. As long as we expect presence, presence will be deferred; as long as we expect sameness, there will be difference. This is *différance*. To reach for another gross oversimplification, deconstruction is provisional because what is being deconstructed is provisional to begin with.

This is, in fact, one of the main reasons why “deconstruction” is so *deeply* disconcerting to many of us. We simply do not want provisional views. We want *Truth*, in the sense that so exercised Nietzsche. Derrida does *violence* to the very idea of truth, we often think. Consider, however, that from Derrida’s perspective the very idea of truth is, in an important sense, already violence. The longing for truth as presence is one way of trying, in terms that Derrida has learned from Emmanuel Levinas, to reduce the Other to the Same.¹⁹ Derrida’s first extended reflection on Levinas²⁰ clearly identified this “reduction” as a form of violence—ultimately a *discursive* form of violence. “Predication is the first violence,” he tells us.²¹ Indeed, Derrida makes it sound as if violence is *unavoidable*:

A Being without violence would be a Being which would occur outside the existent: nothing; nonhistory; nonoccurrence; nonphenomenality. A speech produced without the least violence would determine nothing, would say nothing, would offer

even somewhat sympathetic readers of Derrida conclude that a vicious nihilism of some sort lurks in his thought. The most prominent current examples are Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank. I am not persuaded that they are correct, but detailed engagement with their arguments is far beyond my present scope. For some orientation to the issues involved, see Guy Collins, “Defending Derrida: A Response to Milbank and Pickstock” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001) 344–65.

19. Levinas’s term is *meme* (contrasted with *l’autre*).

20. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 79–153.

21. *Ibid.*, 147.

nothing to the other; it would not be *history*, and it would *show* nothing . . .²²

I already do a sort of violence when I speak to the other. If it were not so, I would not be speaking *about* anything; I would not really be *saying* anything. If there were such a thing as a nonviolent language, it “would be a language which would do without the verb *to be*. . .”²³

III

How tempting it would be at this point to expect relief when we turn from Derrida back to Yoder. Being a believing Christian, Yoder surely insists on *truth* more clearly than Derrida does. Being a much “clearer” thinker and writer than Derrida, Yoder surely has a more clearly discernable project, one which we can thematize or systematize. Being a pacifist, Yoder surely would reject Derrida’s suggestion that violence is unavoidable, that we are already being violent when we *speak*. Rest assured that I am not about to claim that Yoder and Derrida are simply up to the same thing, that Yoder is Derrida in Mennonite clothing. I do want to suggest, however, that there is a reading of Yoder that drastically reduces the apparent distance between them, and that this reading should not be lost amidst the proliferation of Yoderian systems. I have already indicated that “patience” will occupy a central strategic place. Let me be more clear now as to my strategy: By attending to Yoder’s reflections on patience, and placing them in the context of (i) his critical stance toward what he called “Constantinianism,” and (ii) the “epistemological” preoccupations of some of his late essays, I want to suggest that there is at least a deep kinship between Yoder and Derrida in terms of their avoidance of system. A central claim that I wish to advance is that this avoidance has everything to do with violence.

Yoder’s “essay” on patience is not really an essay, of course. It originated as a memo in 1982, and has since been distributed in various forms, often under the more apt title, “Methodological Miscellany.”²⁴ It retains something of the feel of a document in process. Nonetheless,

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Yoder, “Patience,” 24 n. 1.

its overall tone is one of a general response by Yoder to the charge that his views are, in some undesirable sense, “absolutist.” Yoder rejects either “absolutist” or “relativist” as a way of describing his approach, and uses the word “patience” to convey the sense in which he wishes to steer between these two standard options. The clearest indication of how Yoder defines “patience” is in his equation of “reasons for ‘patience’” and “considerations which call for purported ‘absolutes’ to be mitigated, yet without justifying the dominant constructions [such as “relativism”].”²⁵ That he writes here of *purported* absolutes is more significant than it may seem at first. Yoder claims that none of the various kinds of patience he discusses is anything but what should be expected of “any kind of decent person taking a position on the grounds of moral conviction on any important subject.”²⁶ But just as Murphy finds system behind Yoder’s protests that he is not being systematic, I would suggest that what we find here may be rather less pedestrian than Yoder himself implies.²⁷

I have already discussed in another context,²⁸ in connection with Foucault, how some of Yoder’s other “late”²⁹ essays may be understood as fully consistent with a broadly Nietzschean hesitation regarding claims to possess *Truth*, a hesitation shared by Derrida as well as by Foucault. Here I want to call attention to the light that this might cast on Yoder’s understanding of patience. Patience regarding purported absolutes is, I submit, an integral part of Yoder’s more general convic-

25. *Ibid.*, 25.

26. *Ibid.*, 35.

27. Though I emphatically *do not* wish to soften the most important ingredient in his disclaimers: *viz.*, that his considerations are “radically ecumenical” and not “sectarian” (*ibid.*).

28. Blum, “Foucault, Genealogy, Anabaptism.” The Yoder essays in question include “But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” 46–62 in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); “On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992) 285–300; “Walk and Word” (*op. cit.*), and “Meaning After Babble: With Jeffrey Stout Beyond Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996) 125–39.

29. I keep injecting the qualifier “late” because I suspect, based on both his writings and my personal conversations with him, that Yoder’s actual *interest* in what I am calling “epistemological” issues (as opposed to the occasional need to discuss them regardless of interest) grew significantly during the last decade and a half of his life.

tion that the sharing of good news—of gospel—must be non-coercive. Note his comments in connection with patience type 6: “My meeting the interlocutor on his own terms is not merely a matter of accepting the minority’s conversational handicap although it is that. It is also a spirituality and a lifestyle.”³⁰ He expands on this with a footnote: “. . . [N]onviolence is not only an ethic about power but also an epistemology about how to let truth speak for itself.”³¹

Patience is by no means incompatible with the strong conviction that one’s views are in fact true, a point that comes across clearly in Yoder’s essay. It may seem that my attempt to identify patience in Yoder’s thought with some sort of Nietzschean suspicion is at least overwrought, if not completely misguided. Being patient with others who disagree is quite different, we might think, from adopting an attitude of suspicion that makes us unable ever to say “this is true” without a set of unpleasant qualifiers about the perspective from which it *seems* so to us. Being patient in a discursive situation where one is in the minority—and thus where one is especially aware of the violent potential of discourse—is quite different, we might think, from pronouncing that discourse just *is* violent. Insofar as it is one of my intentions here to be a sort of champion of difference, I will certainly not deny the validity of this line of thinking. It is especially clear that Yoder stresses the possibility of nonviolent discourse in a way that Derrida apparently disallows. I believe that there is still more to be said, however. The question of the *differences* between the two is not the same as the question of the *distance* between the two. A bit of further examination of the “Patience” essay, though it does not reduce the differences, may reduce the distance.

It is most clear in patience type 13 (“the ‘modest’ patience of sobriety in finitude”) that patience is not simply a communicative attitude adopted on the near side of an epistemic certitude, and hence added onto the certitude externally as a supplement. This patience amounts to more than simply a polite fallibilist admission that the probability of my being wrong never reaches zero. Yoder spells it out precisely in terms of the need for one’s fallibility to be embodied in discourse:

[T]he certainty in which we have to act one day at a time must never claim *finality*. Our recognition that we may be wrong

30. Yoder, “Patience,” 28.

31. *Ibid.*, 28 n. 9.

must always be *visible*. One way to say this would be to begin every statement one ever makes with “as far as I know” or “until further notice.” That I do not begin every paragraph this way does not mean that I do not mean it.³²

This is not so far, after all, from the suspicion alluded to above. Citing Hubmaier and Denck's openness to correction from their persecutors, Yoder's footnote³³ notably ties this patience to the context in which violence might be done to the one making the truth-claim. Type 12 (“the ‘contrite’ patience of repentance”) alludes to the possibility of the claimant's own complicity in violence toward others. One crucial implication here is not only that I may be wrong, but that my conviction that I am right may be the occasion for violence, quite apart from its truth or falsity. The primary import of truth and falsity is not *intrapersonal* (the *presence* of truth within the Same), but *interpersonal* (truthfulness toward the Other).

When Yoder pursues what he calls a “phenomenology of the moral life,” truthfulness (as opposed to Truth) emerges as a primordial requisite for human association:

There is, as a matter of empirically undeniable fact, a human social fabric characterized by communication. . . . For society to be viable, most of this communication has to be “true” most of the time; i.e., it has to provide a reliable basis for structuring our common life, counting on each other and not being routinely disappointed.³⁴

It is in this context that proscriptions against lying develop, with practice pushing them toward solidification as norms. Because they are applied in everyday contexts, they are “probably concretized as sinning against some simple notion of ‘correspondence’ between words and reality.”³⁵ This process is proceeding apace long before the ethical theorist arrives and tries to decide between utilitarianism, deontology, virtue theory, or other accounts of what makes it True that one should

32. Ibid., 31.

33. Ibid., 31 n. 15.

34. Yoder, “Walk and Word,” 80.

35. Ibid.

not lie. “The life of the community is prior to all possible methodological distillations.”³⁶

The point at which I would like to suggest that the distance between Yoder and Derrida is especially narrow is at the point of their concern for the violence that we would do to the Other. Our impulse is to reduce the Other to the Same, to make the Other an object that fits into the world of which I am the center, to reduce the other to a concept that is intelligible primarily with reference to *me*. Patience is about the primacy of the Other *vis a vis* “the Truth.”

This is where patience also shades into the disavowal of Constantine. The reversal of priorities for the church that Constantine represents, for Yoder, is at bottom a trading of noncoercive witness to the Other for a coercive encompassing that we mistake for redemption. Gerald Schlabach has rightly pointed out that Constantinianism in a socio-political sense is but one manifestation of a broader phenomenon. He writes: “The Deuteronomic problem is the problem of how to receive and celebrate the blessing, the shalom, the good, or ‘the land’ that God desires to give, yet to do so without defensively and violently hoarding God’s blessing.”³⁷

So what about the difference that still glares across this divide, even though it may be more narrow than we thought at first? We noted that Derrida seems to envision violence as unavoidable, as endemic to any discourse, to any “saying that . . .” Yoder, on the other hand, seems confident that there can be nonviolent discourse. The question of who is correct is beyond my present scope, yet I wish to suggest in passing that, in this case too, the difference may not be a matter of great distance. There are hints throughout Yoder’s writings that a commitment to nonviolence, though never *less* than a commitment not to kill, is perhaps never *simply* that, is never a commitment that pretends that killing or not killing is the *only* choice. In response to the allegation that his view would imply that he is more “pure” than others, he responds: “The Niebuhrian or the Sartrean has no corner on dirty hands. The question

36. *Ibid.*, 82.

37. Gerald W. Schlabach, “Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?” in Hauerwas et al., *Wisdom of the Cross*, 449–71.

is not whether one can have clean hands but which kind of complicity in which kind of inevitable evil is preferable.”³⁸

IV

If I have been even moderately successful in my strategic deployment of Yoder's notion of “patience,” we should now be able better to feel the tension with which I began, between the lighthearted patience that is certain of God's rule (the patience of Herbert the Snail) and the patience that asks “Is this a test?” and that may still walk away rather than waiting (the patient of Tool). Patience itself is something with which we are less than patient. “Lord, grant me patience. And Lord, please grant it to me *now!*”

What if Yoder's patience is supposed to be patience with Derrida's *différance*? What if that for which we patiently wait, though it is “to come,” will never be *present*? Patience is all well and good, as long as I am certain that my patience will “pay off.” Images of sudden rapture and of the confusion of those “left behind” appeal as widely as they do because they are visions of vindication not only for God, but *for us*. The more certain I am that I am going to win, the more patient I can be. The more probable it becomes that everything will turn out “right” (by my own lights), the less I will be prone to losing my patience.

Here is where we may note what at the outset I referred to as the tension *within* each of the two thinkers we are attending to. Derrida has emphasized that the difference/deferral of *différance* will not go away; we don't get the presence that we long for. But more recently, he has increasingly written in an eschatological vein, of what he calls “the messianic,” which is emphatically “to come,” even though it will not be present.³⁹ Yoder has emphasized the unfaithfulness of the Constantinian settlement, the importance of witnessing by letting the church be the church, and by letting God be God. But letting the church be the church is letting the church be *visible*, and how does one do that both faithfully

38. Yoder, “Patience,” 40.

39. Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), and *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).

and patiently? How might we find the level of patience that lets God be God by not trying too hard the MAKE the church be the church?⁴⁰

Patience is waiting. It is sitting uneasily in a “not-yet,” without control of its own fulfillment. Patience knows not the times or the seasons. Patience knows that it waits for what is to come, but it does not know if what is to come will ever be present. If it were not so, it would not be patience. Patience is something that we may not truly have until we are impatient with it. Hence, I cannot conclude by assuring you that your patience—our patience—will be rewarded in the way that we would like it to be. We know that it will be rewarded insofar as we have been promised this by the one in whom we trust. But in the way that we would like it to be? That is left unanswered, and it remains the more disconcerting question; it remains *unheimlich*; it makes us tremble. As we pray for patience now, perhaps we will tremble. Indeed, we should do both. We should pray, and we should tremble.

40. The latter problem is a main theme of Peter C. Blum, “Totality, Alterity, and Hospitality: The Openness of Anabaptist Community,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 48 (2003) 159–75.