

## Introduction

GLEN STASSEN TELLS A story about the time he approached John Howard Yoder after a session at the Society of Christian Ethics. Noting that many of the papers bore the mark of his friend's thought, Stassen said, "Your influence is really spreading." Yoder's simple response: "Not mine. Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever one thinks about the accuracy, not to mention the humility, of this response, there is little doubt that Yoder's Jesus-centered writings have gained a wide readership. Since 1999, four special journal issues, six monographs, and six collections of essays have focused on his life and thought,<sup>2</sup> and there is a steady market for new collections of his journal articles and unpublished writings.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the proliferation of commentary about Yoder has not led to a unified assessment of his legacy, and

1. This story is told in Peter Steinfelds, "John H. Yoder, Theologian at Notre Dame, is Dead at 70," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1998. The phrasing used above differs slightly from the published account, as I am following an amended version Stassen distributed to a seminar at Fuller Seminary in the fall of 2005.

2. Bergen and Siegrist, eds., *Powers and Practices*; Carter, *Politics of the Cross*; Dula and Huebner, *New Yoder*; Hauerwas et al., eds., *Wisdom of the Cross*; Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*; Nation, *John Howard Yoder*; Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*; Nugent, ed., *Radical Ecumenicity*; Ollenberger and Koontz, eds., *Mind Patient and Untamed*; Sider, *To See History Doxologically*; Somer, ed., *La sagesse de la croix*; Zimmerman, *Politics of Jesus*. Additionally, see Barber, *On Diaspora*; Bourne, *Seek the Peace of the City*; Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*; Park, *Missional Ecclesiologies in Creative Tension*; Shaffer, *Moral Memoranda from John Howard Yoder*. The journal issues are Epp, ed., "John Howard Yoder," special issue, *Conrad Grebel Review*; Holland, ed., "The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited and Re-Imagined: Reflections on the Work of John Howard Yoder," special issue, *CrossCurrents*; Roth, ed., special issue, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*; Snyder, ed., "John Howard Yoder as Historian," special issue, *Conrad Grebel Review*.

3. In addition to ARS, *End of Sacrifice*, JCSR, NV, *Revolutionary Christianity*, THW, and WL, see Yoder's essays in Martens and Howell, eds., *John Howard Yoder*; Vogt, ed., *Roots of Concern*; Vogt, ed., *Concern for Education*; Nugent, ed., *Radical Ecumenicity*. New editions of CA, DPR, KB (with previously unpublished essays), OR, and Preface have been released, and PWK gathers his published writings on epistemology and method. See also Yoder's online archive of unpublished writings, UNDA.

## Introduction

many dispute the identification of his influence with Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The present book is an attempt to grapple with Yoder's critics in order to decide how to move forward with a revised "Yoderian" theology. How that revision is accomplished is described in the remainder of this introduction, which is divided into three parts: (1) an overview of the current state of Yoder scholarship and this book's place within it; (2) an argument that Yoder's theology can profitably read as a "sociological theology" that exhibits reductive tendencies, but which can be revised to be non-reductive; and (3) an outline and justification of the proposed method of revision, which involves putting Yoder's theology of the principalities and powers into conversation with the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

### The Many Yoders and Yoder's Many Readers

John Howard Yoder (1927–1997) was an American Mennonite theologian whose work centered on the church's mandate to imitate the nonviolent politics of Jesus. Though most of his life was spent in America, he began his career in Europe while enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Basel in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Drawn to questions about the relation of church and state, he organized discussions between the Historic Peace Churches and the established European churches for the World Council of Churches.<sup>5</sup> Many of his early publications emerged from these ecumenical discussions.<sup>6</sup> He was simultaneously involved in a publishing venture, the *Concern* journal, with a few other young American Mennonites who were also based in Europe. Yoder's ecumenical papers and his essays in *Concern* were focused on the correlation between the life of Jesus and the life of the church. They were, in other words, exercises in Christian ethics. For his doctoral dissertation, however, he chose a historical topic: the dialogues between the early Swiss Anabaptists and the Reformers.<sup>7</sup> This choice was necessitated by the resistance Yoder encountered among the European professoriate to work in Anabaptist theology.<sup>8</sup> Researching as a historian, he surmised, would allow him to investigate his theological preoccupations without causing controversy.

By the late 1960s, Yoder had published his dissertation (and some of its findings in historical journals), essays in *Concern*, much of his ecumenical

4. Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 16–21; Zimmerman, *Politics of Jesus*, 70–100.

5. *Ibid.*, and see Durnbaugh, "John Howard Yoder's Role in 'The Lordship of Christ over Church and State' Conferences."

6. Yoder, *CWS; DPR; Karl Barth*; "Reinhold Niebuhr."

7. Yoder, *ARS*.

8. Zimmerman, *Politics of Jesus*, 140–141.

material, and a translation of Hendrik Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers*. The main critical response, in print at least, was directed toward his dissertation.<sup>9</sup> Historians accused Yoder of distorting the evidence to serve a romanticized vision of Anabaptist origins. Some of these historians were from rival Reformation or secular historiographical traditions, but some were other Anabaptists concerned that Yoder's reconstruction unfairly limited the heterogeneity of their common beginnings. This fear that his theological preferences served as ideological blinders to historical reality would follow Yoder throughout his career and, indeed, beyond the grave. Although Yoder's historiography has many defenders, and many of his central findings remain plausible, there are serious questions about his methodological approach to scripture and church history.

Yoder did not engage in original historical research again after completing his dissertation, and his attention turned fully to theological ethics. His reputation, too, was made as an ethicist with the publication of *The Politics of Jesus* in 1972.<sup>10</sup> That book presented a powerful reading of the New Testament as a summons to the church to Jesus' radical nonviolent politics. *The Politics of Jesus* was, and is, widely read.<sup>11</sup> Along with other of Yoder's writings, it helped galvanize an emergent "evangelical left" that combined a focus on scripture and the church with social justice activism.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it propelled Yoder to the forefront of Anabaptist theology for the remainder of his career.<sup>13</sup> Given the predominance, at the time, of the Niebuhr brothers in American theological ethics, many readers regarded Yoder's pacifistic ecclesiology as an invitation to sectarian withdrawal from political activity.<sup>14</sup> If Christians cannot participate in state violence, the

9. Criticisms of Yoder's historiography, as well as of his general hermeneutic, are detailed in chapters 3 and 4 below.

10. Such is the judgment of, for instance, Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 463.

11. See Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, xvi; Zimmerman, *Politics of Jesus*, 23.

12. Yoder's impact was felt especially by the Sojourners community and the Mennonite Central Committee's Washington Office. Cf. Cartwright, "Radical Catholicity," 44, and Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents*, 175. On the term "evangelical left," see Hunter, *To Change the World*, 136–38. Hunter sees Yoder as a "neo-Anabaptist" separatist (165), underplaying his ties to Jim Wallis and the other evangelical left figures he discusses (150).

13. Gordon Kaufmann is the other twentieth-century Mennonite theologian with a broad ecumenical audience. But "Kaufman does not identify his basic standpoint as Anabaptist" and "challenges all attempts to theologize within any past perspective" (Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 73). For comparison of Yoder and Kaufman, see Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers*, 65–69, and Stoltzfus, "Nonviolent Jesus," 38–41.

14. Criticisms of Yoder's sectarianism are discussed in chapters 5 and 6 below. In *Social Ethics in the Making*, Dorrien presents Reinhold Niebuhr as the major figure in American Christian ethics. Although he acknowledges that Niebuhr's influenced had

## Introduction

critics argued, they must abdicate any claim to political influence. Yoder and his growing number of advocates insisted that the Niebuhrians illegitimately restricted the definition of politics so that a community dedicated to following Jesus could only be considered sectarian and apolitical. By contrast, the New Testament portrays Jesus as a political martyr and the church as an alternative political community based on his politics. To a certain extent, Yoder won the day. His friend and disciple Stanley Hauerwas put his rhetorical and philosophical gifts behind Yoder's project and made it, arguably, one of the leading options in theological ethics.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the chorus of voices clamoring for a more robust and engaged political vision has not quieted. There are many, even among Yoder's own followers, who believe that he unnecessarily limited the scope of Christian political participation and underplayed the significance of the common ethical resources shared by church and world.

The editors of a recent collection of essays entitled *The New Yoder* begin their history of Yoder's reception at this point. "Old Yoder" scholarship, they contend, was concerned with defending or impugning his pacifism and alleged sectarianism.<sup>16</sup> In the intellectual environment in which Yoder's work was first encountered, particularity and difference were frowned upon. After the postmodern revolution, however, those vices became virtues.<sup>17</sup> Important philosophers from various quarters have begun to sound much more like Yoder in their appreciation of historicity, their suspicion of liberal orthodoxy, and their prioritization of dialogue. Now the emphasis shifts from defending Yoder to using him to explore perennial philosophical issues alongside likeminded postmodern travelers. The editors of *The New Yoder* acknowledge Stanley Hauerwas's influence here, as well as that of Radical Orthodoxy, a postmodern theological movement initiated by a trio of British Anglicans.<sup>18</sup> Hauerwas and Radical Orthodoxy, they claim,

---

waned by the 1960s, he views the liberationist ethics that soon became dominant as proper extensions of Niebuhrian realism (271, 447). On H. Richard Niebuhr's legacy, see Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics*.

15. See, for instance, the evaluations of Hauerwas's influence in Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 474–88, and Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 140.

16. Dula and Huebner, "Introduction," ix–xii. They characterize old Yoder scholarship as existing before 1990 and, excepting Hauerwas and James McClendon, mainly being the work of Mennonites. Their primary example is A. James Reimer. This designation of pre-1990 Yoder scholarship as a Mennonite affair is surprising, given the work of Richard J. Mouw, J. Philip Wogaman and many others. All of these figures appear throughout this book.

17. *Ibid.*, xiv.

18. *Ibid.*, xviii.

introduced many Yoder scholars to congenial postmodern voices of both post-analytic and Continental persuasion.

What they do not say, but could, is that Hauerwas and Radical Orthodoxy have also contributed to a theological climate in which traditional metaphysical issues, especially those concerned with the sacraments, are prominent again.<sup>19</sup> Anabaptist theologians have contributed, too, as they have sought to recover their spiritual traditions and emphasize their continuities with creedal orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> Though differing in important ways, these sacramentally minded theologians draw from patristic and medieval sources in a manner that would have made Yoder uncomfortable, to put it mildly.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Augustine and Aquinas are often their leading lights, Yoder saw those classic theologians as dangerous and unhelpful.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the sacramental thinkers regard Christendom, at least to some degree, as a salutary development, Yoder saw it as the greatest blow to the church's integrity.<sup>23</sup> Whereas they celebrate the interconnections between the spiritual and political dimensions of ecclesial practice, Yoder worried that discussion of the former distracted from commitment to the latter.<sup>24</sup> In each case, the postmodern return to the premodern Catholic and early Anabaptist heritages has led to suspicions about Yoder's typical metaphysical reticence.

19. See, e.g., Hauerwas, *Grain of the Universe*; Hauerwas and Wells, *Christian Ethics*; Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, "Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, 1–20, and Milbank and Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy Ten Years On," 151–69.

20. E.g., Dintaman, "Spiritual Poverty," and Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*.

21. On Yoder and Hauerwas see, e.g., Doerksen, "Share the House"; Hovey, "Public Ethics"; G. Schlabach, "Continuity and Sacrament." On Yoder and Radical Orthodoxy, see C. Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 39–48, and H. Huebner, "Participation, Peace, and Forgiveness."

22. E.g., Brubacher Kaethler, "Practice of Reading the Other," 48–51 (on Yoder and Aquinas); Hauerwas, *Grain of the Universe*, 23–37; Hauerwas, *State of the University*, 136–46; Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 284–87 (on Yoder and Augustine); Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382–442; Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*; Smith, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 116–22; Ward, *Cities of God*, 227–37.

23. See chapter 3 below for Yoder's reading of Christendom. There are various perspectives within Radical Orthodoxy, recent Anabaptist theology, and Hauerwas's work on Christendom. For more positive evaluations, see Hauerwas, *Good Company*, 19–32; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 410–13; Reimer, "Positive Theology."

24. E.g., Hauerwas, *Grain of the Universe*, 205–41; Kroeker, "Yoder's Voluntarism," 56–58; Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 162–86. See Yoder's consistently historicist, non-metaphysical treatment of doctrine in *Preface*, 58, 276, 306–7, 318, 371, 393. He identifies historicism as the biblical, "Hebraic" outlook.

## Introduction

In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder positioned himself as offering a corrective to metaphysical christologies that bracketed out political questions.<sup>25</sup> He did not, there or elsewhere, elaborate a trinitarian metaphysics or a doctrine of two natures, considering these topics at best to be doctrinal “fences” that kept the church’s focus on imitating Jesus.<sup>26</sup> There are some indications that he simply assumed creedal orthodoxy as normative, and some indications that he thought it was dispensable—Yoder has defenders and detractors on both sides of the argument.<sup>27</sup> For his detractors, whether he assumed orthodoxy or not is beside the point. The problem, they charge, is rather that a silence about orthodox metaphysics combined with a historicist’s zeal for demonstrating the political and ethical meanings of doctrine leads to a body of work that is easily assimilable to secular thought. Without some intelligible framework for speaking of the divinity of Christ, Jesus appears as just another political hero or wise moral teacher. On this reading, the only way Yoder’s influence is equivalent to Jesus’ is if Jesus is the great man of nineteenth-century liberal Protestant biography.<sup>28</sup>

The editors of *The New Yoder*, therefore, may be correct that a new era of postmodern, philosophically oriented Yoder scholarship has emerged. But their sanguine outlook is questionable, as the orientation they celebrate has raised additional doubts about the validity of Yoder’s legacy: the new Yoder possibly spells the death of Yoder. Furthermore, there is more continuity between old and new Yoders than the editors let on, as familiar criticisms of his method and politics are now heard from “postmodern” readers as well.<sup>29</sup> A more accurate depiction of the state of Yoder scholarship would describe the many Yoders that now exist thanks to Yoder’s expanding circle of readers.

David C. Cramer takes this taxonomic route in his review essay on *The New Yoder* and two other collections of essays on Yoder, *Powers and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder* and *Radical Ecumenicity*:

25. Yoder, *PJ*, 11.

26. Yoder, *Preface*, 204, 223.

27. These debates arise throughout the book, but especially in chapters 1 and 2.

28. See esp. Martens, “Universal History,” 131–46, where Yoder is compared to Rauschenbusch.

29. See the essays by Boyarin and Coles in Dula and Huebner, eds., *New Yoder*, and Sider, *History and Holiness*, 81–117. Dula and Huebner are careful to stipulate that “old” and “new” are “broad, occasionally clumsy, generalizations” (x), and acknowledge that “old” readings persist. They do not seem to recognize that many of the “new” essays in their collection are concerned with “old” questions, even if these are raised by non-Mennonites and non-Niebuhrans. See esp. the discussion in chapter 5 below.

*Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder.*<sup>30</sup> Noting that “a recurring theme in these collections is the question of how to inherit or appropriate Yoder’s legacy,” he identifies sixteen “distinct, though sometimes overlapping, ways of inheriting Yoder” discussed in the essays.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the “old” and “new” readings of Yoder, he lists the following interpretive possibilities: Yoder as a theological revisionist; an Augustinian; a postmodern theologian; a “radical democrat”; a purveyor of secular Christianity; a Hauerwasian postliberal; an apocalyptic Barthian; an ecumenist; a theological liberal; an evangelical; an advocate of international peacekeeping efforts; an anarchist opponent of international peacekeeping efforts; a sociological reductionist; and an “expansionist” whose sociological emphasis was meant to enlarge, not reject, “personalistic, pietistic and sacramentalistic accounts of the faith.”<sup>32</sup> To this catalogue one might append the older readings discussed above, namely, Yoder as a reliable guide to or distorter of scripture and history, and Yoder as political activist or sectarian.

Cramer recognizes that some of these readings are compatible and some are in conflict. The conflicting readings demand attention to the question of what it means to inherit Yoder faithfully, and the three books under review offer different strategies of faithful inheritance.<sup>33</sup> *The New Yoder*, according to Cramer, inherits Yoder by putting his work into dialogue with other thinkers. Its editors acknowledge the dialogical emphasis of their approach, claiming that this emphasis brings a range of new issues to Yoder scholarship.<sup>34</sup> The downside of their approach, as they also acknowledge, is that “the new Yoder” mostly ignores scripture and Anabaptist history in favor of philosophy: “not only is the new Yoder much more philosophical than Yoder himself was, it is more philosophical than he ever would have wanted to be.”<sup>35</sup> Cramer, moreover, suggests that this philosophical focus has the tendency to make Yoder’s work seem overly theoretical and removed from the concrete ecclesial concerns that were his own focus.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, *Powers and Practices* and *Radical Ecumenicity* mostly retain Yoder’s idiom and interests. *Powers and Practices* is largely taken up with attempts to resolve criticisms of Yoder’s theology through

30. Cramer, “Inheriting Yoder.” See also Carter, “Liberal Reading of Yoder,” and J. D. Weaver, “Yoder Legacy,” for less systematic attempts at defining trends in Yoder reception.

31. Cramer, “Inheriting Yoder,” 133–34.

32. *Ibid.*, 134–36.

33. *Ibid.*, 137–41.

34. Dula and Huebner, “Introduction,” xvi.

35. *Ibid.*, xix.

36. Cramer, “Inheriting Yoder,” 138.

## Introduction

clarification of his writings. Cramer finds this strategy helpful, but is wary of attempts to systematize Yoder's thought.<sup>37</sup> Yoder wrote voluminously and for specific contexts; apparent contradictions within his *oeuvre* should be explored patiently in light of the purpose of a given composition. The authors writing in *Radical Ecumenicity* instead use Yoder's thought to explore various dimensions of the Stone-Campbell tradition and its relation to the wider body of Christ. Cramer suggests that this approach of putting Yoder's work into conversation with specific ecclesial traditions is probably the most amenable to Yoder's own conception of theology.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that the approach of each of the three collections is necessary to inherit Yoder faithfully. Although Cramer does not specify the reasoning behind this conclusion, it can be extrapolated from his later definition of faithful inheritance as tending to both the content and the dialogical, un-systematic style of Yoder's writings.<sup>39</sup> This definition is drawn from Yoder's understanding of tradition as a process of "looping back" to resources from the past in order to cope with issues in the present.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore appropriate, and faithful, for scholars of Yoder's thought to take it into new territory, to explore its internal intricacies, and to extend its ecumenical logic.

Cramer's assessment represents the most thorough review of recent scholarship on John Howard Yoder, and is preferable to alternatives that simplify and dichotomize the various viewpoints without thorough examination.<sup>41</sup> The present book is an exercise in faithful inheritance that combines each of the three approaches named by Cramer. Like the new Yoder, Yoder is put into dialogue with an "outsider," Pierre Bourdieu. But unlike the new Yoder, this dialogue does not replace a focus on scripture and Anabaptist history. Yoder's interpretation of the Pauline language of principalities and powers is in view throughout the book. The historical writings are of special interest in chapters 3 and 4, which cover methodological issues, and in chapter 5, which introduces Yoder's politics. Moreover, it is arguable that, as a sociologist, Bourdieu is not quite the outsider that a more philosophical dialogue partner would be. He trained in philosophy, and deals with many philosophical topics, but his sociology was constructed largely as a repudiation of philosophical abstraction.<sup>42</sup> His unremitting focus on

37. *Ibid.*, 139.

38. *Ibid.*, 140–41.

39. *Ibid.*, 142–46.

40. Yoder, *PK*, 69.

41. Cf. Cramer's analysis of Carter's essay, "Liberal Reading," on liberal versus evangelical reception strategies ("Inheriting Yoder," 144–46).

42. See chapter 4 below.



the practical and concrete, his insistence that even the most “pure” theory has (often insidious) political consequences, and his resistance to common sense dualisms in many ways parallel Yoder’s own commitments.

Moreover, Cramer’s insinuation that Yoder was only interested in ecumenical dialogue is manifestly untrue. Even if he did prioritize ecumenical dialogue, he was engaged in and endorsed dialogue with non-Christian others. Yoder repeatedly referred to social scientific literature to buttress his claims about the political viability of nonviolent action and minority community structures.<sup>43</sup> He was also conversant with the social scientific study of punishment, and made tentative remarks about a nonviolent theology of punishment based on his reading of Durkheim, Girard and others.<sup>44</sup> Besides, in an essay on interfaith dialogue he maintained that there was no real distinction to be made between religious and secular “believing communities.”<sup>45</sup> Christians, he argued, should be prepared to dialogue with other believers whether their master is Buddha or Marx. Yoder himself was engaged in a lengthy dialogue with the Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher Steven Schwarzschild.<sup>46</sup> As a sociologist, Bourdieu is perhaps a more fitting dialogue partner than the philosophers treated in *The New Yoder*; but, in principle, there is no reason to limit the range of potential partners.

This book also shares the approaches of *Powers and Practices* and *Radical Ecumenicity*. As in the former collection, there are extended close readings of Yoder’s texts in each chapter below. Contradictions are explored and obscurities identified, but there is no attempt to offer a grand Yoderian theological system. Although the book is organized according to the typical creation-fall-redemption pattern, no effort is made to offer a comprehensive Yoderian account of each of the loci. Chapter topics were, rather, chosen by grouping various criticisms of Yoder and organizing them within the framework of his theology of the principalities and powers. At times Yoder’s writings are synthesized to avoid redundancy, but more often they are discussed chronologically and contextualized. Yoder’s primary context, as explored in *Radical Ecumenicity*, was ecumenical dialogue. This book constantly refers to Yoder’s ecumenical context, both when discussing his own writings and those of his critics. Ecumenicity and dialogue are, furthermore, major themes of the book.

43. Yoder’s interactions with the social sciences are detailed in chapters 3 and 4 below.

44. Yoder, *You Have It Coming: Good Punishment: The Legitimate Social Function of Punitive Behavior*, in *UNDA*.

45. Yoder, *RP*, 253.

46. Yoder’s reflections on Judaism, and comments on Schwarzschild, are contained in his *JCSR*. Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 87–115, draws upon their correspondence to examine their relationship in detail.

## Introduction

In conclusion, this book is an attempt to inherit Yoder faithfully without ignoring the serious issues raised by his critics past and present. It acknowledges the methodological, political, and metaphysical problems in his work, and its response at once “loops back” to Yoder’s work and seeks new dialogue partners. It dialogues with the work of a secular, arguably “post-modern” sociologist,<sup>47</sup> yet it does not leave behind the ecumenical setting that was dear to Yoder. It does not assume that there is or should be only one Yoder, and it does not pretend to offer the last word on his life and work.

### “Sociological Theology,” Its Virtues and Vices, and a Possible Solution

Even if Yoder’s work cannot be systematized, its different aspects can be emphasized as organizing motifs.<sup>48</sup> For example, Mark Thiessen Nation’s introductory book on Yoder is organized around the motif of ecumenism.<sup>49</sup> Chapters explore Yoder’s Mennonite heritage, “evangelical witness,” and “Catholic convictions.” Craig Carter focuses on Yoder’s connections to systematic theology, and so his overview includes chapters on Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology.<sup>50</sup> Chris K. Huebner, on the other hand, highlights Yoder’s unsystematic, ad hoc theological method, and his writings typically utilize Yoder’s thought to undermine the “theoretical closure” of rival theologies.<sup>51</sup> Such motifs are, of course, the basis for the many readings of Yoder identified by Cramer. As he suggests, the relation between them is complex and there are varying degrees of overlap and tension among them. A given motif may be judged by its faithfulness to the content and method of Yoder’s work, but in principle there is no reason why there cannot be multiple faithful motifs. Because Yoder’s *oeuvre* is rich and varied, and because his method is resistant to calcification, the flourishing of organizing motifs may be seen as part of the process of faithful inheritance.

On this view, a motif is a practical tool honed to deploy Yoder’s thought for some purpose or another. A motif may eventually be deemed unfit for purpose, or the purpose for which it is honed judged as unworthy. Yet the development of a new motif should not in and of itself be dismissed

47. Cf. Lash, “Modernization and Postmodernization.”

48. This section foreshadows the discussion of concept construction in chapter 4.

49. Nation, *John Howard Yoder*.

50. Carter, *Politics of the Cross*.

51. See Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, where he brings Yoder into conversation with Mennonite theology, Radical Orthodoxy, narrative theology, Karl Barth, globalization theory, and others.

as a hostile claim to a fixed Yoderian “essence” that defeats all other motifs. A new motif may rather be developed in order to face a new context or to engage a new dialogue partner. In that case, new organizing motifs may be welcomed as potentially faithful co-inheritors of Yoder’s legacy. Tension between the various motifs can be acknowledged and explored, and any overlap accepted and welcomed.

The present book is organized around the motif of Yoder’s “sociological theology.” At its most basic, this motif suggests that Yoder’s work offers theological insight into the logic of social being. His writings employ convictions about God to illuminate ideal and actual patterns of social organization. The justification for this motif is mostly contained in the chapters that follow this introduction. In other words, the description of Yoder’s work as a sociological theology becomes plausible when his work is displayed as such in the body of the book. The viability of the motif emerges from its use as a heuristic tool in the process of research, and cannot be proven before the fact.

It is, nonetheless, possible to say a few preliminary words about some of the advantages of construing Yoder’s theology in terms of a sociological theology—though it must be kept in mind that these “advantages” do not, *prima facie*, entail the rejection of all other motifs. One strong reason for using the motif of sociological theology is that it distances his work somewhat from motifs that portray Yoder as a philosophical theologian. As argued above, there is no clear principle in Yoder’s theology that demands separation from philosophy. Yet even the editors of *The New Yoder* admit that highly philosophical treatments tend to displace Yoder’s more concrete interests and context. As Cramer puts it, if the authors contained in that volume “err on any side, it is on the side of theory—albeit praxis oriented, anti-theory theorizing.”<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, the sociological tradition, at least as it is represented by Pierre Bourdieu, views theoretical construction and empirical inquiry as interdependent.<sup>53</sup> A sociological theology, then, would not err either on the side of theory or on the side of a supposedly theory-free practice. It would marry its propositions about the character of God to scrupulous attention to the history of God’s interactions with human society. Further proclamations about social order, whether in the church or at large, would not shy from consideration of specific cases. There are numerous examples of such a sociological theology in Yoder’s body of work, from his dissertation on Anabaptist history, to his review of New Testament scholarship in *The Politics of*

52. Cramer, “Inheriting Yoder,” 138.

53. See chapter 4 below on Bourdieu’s method.

## Introduction

Jesus, to his study of the social impact of liturgical practice in *Body Politics*. At its best, Yoder's theology is deeply sociological.

Another reason for using the motif of sociological theology, however, is that Yoder's theology is also deeply sociological at its most troubled. As noted above, a significant current area of concern regards his reduction of metaphysics to issues of social process. This point has been pressed to its furthest extent by Paul Martens in essays on Yoder's view of the sacraments and his conception of history. Martens contends that Yoder's interest in demonstrating the communal, political nature of Christianity to both Christians and non-Christians led him, at least in the 1990s, to speak only of what could be verified empirically. For Yoder, on Martens's view, what is important about Jesus is that he, like the prophet Jeremiah and Gandhi, realized that suffering minority communities change history. What is important about the church is that it is a history changing community. At this point, Yoder seems to exchange theological for sociological claims. No insight into Jesus' status as the second person of the Trinity is necessary to understand his work, nor is any sense of the mystery of sacramental participation in the risen Christ important for describing the church's character. All that is needed is an empirical understanding of social and political processes. All that is needed is sociology, not theology. These arguments raise the possibility that Yoder "is merely presenting a form of Christianity that is but a stepping stone to assimilation into secularism."<sup>54</sup>

Although Martens's arguments might suggest that the second term in "sociological theology" should be left out, Yoder did clearly write in a theological idiom, even in the 1990s. Thomas N. Finger has also written an article critical of Yoder's reduction of theology to social ethics, but he admits that the pneumatological aspects of Yoder's late work *Body Politics* (from 1992) cannot be ignored.<sup>55</sup> It is perhaps better to say, therefore, that Yoder's sociological theology at times emphasized the sociological in a way that obscured its relation to the theological. Whatever he intended, he occasionally makes it too easy to read God out of society. Yoder's is a sociological theology, for better or worse.

If a motif is a tool honed for a specific purpose, what purpose does the sociological theology motif serve? The primary aim of this book is to determine how Yoder's theology might be revised in light of allegations that it does not further the legacy of Jesus, in other words, that it is not fully Christian. In the previous section, Yoder's reception history was traced to highlight three major areas of criticism, each of which may be articulated

54. Martens, "Problematic Development," 73. See also his "Universal History."

55. Finger, "Theology to Ethics," 333.

in terms of a reduction: (1) the methodological reduction of the complexity of church (and other) history; (2) the moral reduction of theologically legitimate socio-political activity; and (3) the sociological reduction of the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of Christian faith. The basic proposal of the book is that the motif of sociological theology allows for Yoder's assumptions about the nature and function of social reality—his “social theory”—to come to the surface. Once surfaced, these social theoretical assumptions can be revised in such a way that his theology ceases either to flirt with or to fall into any of the three named reductions.

This proposal does not assume that Yoder's theological and social theoretical assumptions are neatly separable. One of Yoder's central insights, arguably, is that theological conviction entails a certain vision of social reality.<sup>56</sup> Yet it seems that aspects of Yoder's vision of society limited or distorted his theological convictions. Namely, his attempt to proclaim the gospel in sociological terms appears to have obscured, at times, his theological commitments to methodological patience, faithful politics, and spiritual participation in Christ. A revised Yoderian sociological theology will be willing to revisit each of these commitments and propose an improved, non-reductive social theory.

## Outline of the Book

In order to surface Yoder's social theory, the focus of the book is on his theology of the principalities and powers. As detailed in chapter 5 below, Yoder argued repeatedly that the Pauline language of principalities and powers was “roughly analogous” to contemporary social scientific terminology.<sup>57</sup> Drawing principally on Hendrik Berkhof's small book, *Christ and the Powers*, he portrayed the powers as created social structures that fell into sin but are now subject to the redeeming lordship of the risen Christ.

This conception of social structures as created, fallen, and being redeemed, he insists, facilitates a theologically subtle and sociologically realistic mode of moral discernment. Christ is at the center of the theology of the principalities and powers, as firstborn of creation, suffering servant, and risen lord. It is through Christ that anything is known of the “original” shape of the powers, and therefore it is through Christ that a clear understanding is gained of their distorted, fallen shape and of their future state of redemption. By attending closely to Christ's own interactions with the

56. See chapter 4 below on Yoder's view of sociology: he rejected any “closed” vision of society that automatically ruled out servanthood as politically effective.

57. Yoder, “Natural Law,” 22.

## Introduction

powers, Christians have a clue as to how they might participate in their ongoing redemption. They will not condemn the powers, which are part of God's good creation, but they will also refuse to identify any fallen power with God's coming reign. They will, rather, carefully review the shape of a given power at a given place and time as they encounter it in the process of imitating the politics of Jesus.

The theology of the principalities and powers is, of course, not the only theme Yoder treated that is laden with social theory. Christian witness to the state, war and peace, the politics of Jesus, body politics, sacrament as social process, the exilic vocation of the church, Jewish-Christian relations, community hermeneutics—all are exemplary of his approach to sociological theology. But these and other themes can easily be seen, and many of them have been seen, as falling prey to the temptation of sociological reduction. Yoder's treatment of the powers has not escaped such criticism, as Marva Dawn suggests that it reduces the complex biblical portrait of social and spiritual structures.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, in his theology of the principalities and powers, Yoder commits himself to robust doctrines of creation, providence, the fall, and the church's spiritual participation in the risen Christ's eschatological rule. In no other theme does his commitment to these doctrines—none of which is easily reducible to sociology—emerge as clearly as it does here.

Hence, the decision to focus on Yoder's theology of the principalities and powers brings his social theoretical assumptions to the fore at the point where he is least reductive. For not only does his understanding of the powers include "high" metaphysical commitments, but it also calls for empirical rigor in moral discernment and a broad, cosmic framework for approaching Christian politics. This presentation of the strongest version of Yoder's sociological theology is not meant to shield him from criticism, but rather to provide the most adequate basis for revision once criticisms are considered. Revisions to the social theory contained in his theology of the principalities and powers will be more minimal and, thereby, closer in spirit to Yoder's own work, than if the revision process focused on a more reductive theme.

A final reason for focusing on his theology of the principalities and powers is that it has not been reviewed systematically in its own terms.<sup>59</sup> It is

58. See chapter 1 below.

59. That said, Scott Prather is currently writing a PhD thesis at the University of Aberdeen entitled *Powers and the Power of Mammon*, which draws from Yoder and Barth's theologies of the powers. Other significant treatments of Yoder on the powers include Bourne, *Seek the Peace*, 210–12; Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 146–47; Dawn, *Ellul*, 59–61; Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*, 99–108; Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals*, 114–25; Murphy and Ellis, *Moral Nature*, 179–80; Parler, "Politics of Creation," 69–72; Stassen,

often grouped with Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* and similar treatments by Karl Barth, Jacques Ellul, and Walter Wink, and is rarely considered to have an integrity of its own in the context of Yoder's wider *oeuvre*. This state of affairs is, perhaps, exacerbated by his self-portrayal as one who merely presented the scholarly consensus summarized by Berkhof. Although it is true that Yoder did not do original exegesis on the relevant Pauline passages, it is also true that, once placed within *Christian Witness to the State*, *The Politics of Jesus* and other works, Berkhof's synthesis became Yoder's own. A subsidiary purpose of this book, therefore, is to articulate a distinctly Yoderian theology of the principalities and powers. This purpose is attained by explicating his writings on the principalities and powers as fully as possible, paying attention to their contextual origins and connections to other of his writings.

There are five primary texts on the powers in Yoder's body of work. His first book, *The Christian Witness to the State*, published in 1963, opens with a discussion of Christ's lordship over the powers as the foundation of the church's witness.<sup>60</sup> Nine years later, the chapter "Christ and Power" in *The Politics of Jesus* summarizes Berkhof's argument to demonstrate that Paul and his followers considered Jesus' relevance in terms of social structure and power.<sup>61</sup> The principalities and powers featured again in two lecture series from the early 1980s. In the third of his Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1980, he would turn to the powers to indicate that flexible Christian moral discernment can be centered on Jesus rather than the "orders of creation."<sup>62</sup> The eighth of his recently published Warsaw Lectures, from 1983, portrays the powers as part of an early Christian cosmology supportive of nonviolent convictions.<sup>63</sup> Finally, he was asked to revise his unpublished critique of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* for the 1996 collection *Authentic Transformation*.<sup>64</sup> Yoder, who had recently

---

"New Vision," 211–22; Toole, *Godot in Sarajevo*, 218–25. Cf. N. Kerr, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic*. See chapter 1 for an overview of scholarship on the principalities and powers.

60. Yoder, *CWS*, 8–11.

61. Yoder, *PJ*, 134–58.

62. Yoder, "Servant."

63. Yoder, *Nonviolence*, 97–106.

64. Yoder, "HRN." Comparison with unpublished drafts of this essay from 1964 and 1976 suggests that the version published in *Authentic Transformation* was an extensive revision. Yoder added a new section on typological analysis (43–52); moved the section on "The Christ of the New Testament"—which contains significant comments on the powers—to highlight how Niebuhr's ethical criteria are unbiblical (67–71); added four new items to the section on "The Social Shape of Moral Judgment in the Church," one of which relates to the powers, (75–77); and added substantial sections treating methodological issues (77–82) and setting forth his alternative understanding of Christian

## Introduction

supervised Marva Dawn's doctoral dissertation on Ellul's treatment of the powers,<sup>65</sup> proposes the theology of the principalities and powers as an alternative framework for cultural criticism.

The exposition of these texts occurs over the course of the entire book, which is organized according to the basic creation-fall-redemption framework Yoder inherited from Berkhof. For each part of the framework, two chapters address different aspects of Yoder's sociological theology and its criticisms. The first two chapters examine the spiritual, personal, and triune context of created life, and the meaning of human freedom in a structured social world. The second two chapters look at violence and theological method after the fall. The third pair is concerned with the redemption of the powers. Church, Spirit, and the relationship between the particular and the universal are the major themes there.

Each chapter itself is made up of three sections. The first section presents material from Yoder's theology of the powers, and then relates it to his broader *oeuvre* and relevant criticisms. This presentation always includes a consideration of the pertinent passages from scripture and Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* that frame Yoder's discussion. The intent here is to introduce Yoder, not offer original exegesis. Historical-critical insights into scripture are occasionally useful for this purpose, but they are not a focus. Yoder's theology is reviewed through close readings of the powers texts and then of writings from elsewhere in his corpus germane to the topic. The powers texts are most often treated chronologically and, when space allows, so are the other writings. This approach is helpful for showing how Yoder's thought developed, which is a major point of contention in current scholarship. It is also a reminder that Yoder's theology was itself an evolving social practice connected to other events in his life.

The presence of criticisms does not, of course, entail the presence of problems in Yoder's work. The validity of each criticism is judged in light of the prior presentation of Yoder's work and of secondary discussion. But even when a particular criticism appears weak and insubstantial, it often points to a place where Yoder's thought can be revised for greater clarity. The sheer persistence of some of the more obvious misreadings would seem to call for such revision. After identifying valid criticisms of the area of Yoder's sociological theology under review, each chapter moves to a revisionary

---

cultural discernment (82–89). In this final section, part of Yoder's rationale for detailed discernment is drawn from his theology of the principalities and powers (85). The early drafts of "HRN" are held at the library of the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary under the titles "Richard Niebuhr—Christ and Culture; Analysis and Critique" and "Christ and Culture: A Critique of H. Richard Niebuhr."

65. Dawn, *Ellul*.



proposal. The proposals are revisionary in the sense that they are intended as improvements to Yoder's writings. Yoder is neither abandoned, nor is he venerated as infallible. Although it is hoped that these proposals will be judged as "Yoderian," as efforts in faithful inheritance, consideration of criticisms leads to the conclusion that his heritage should not simply be preserved in its original state. Furthermore, Yoder's insistence on the need for continual radical reformation suggests that he did not accept his own word as the last word. An embrace of the *semper reformanda* creed entails turning one's critical sights on Yoder himself.

Each of the proposed revisions aims to correct for the insalubrious reductions present in Yoder's sociological theology. The primary instrument of revision in this book is the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1930–2002) is perhaps the leading French sociologist after Durkheim and one of France's great public intellectuals.<sup>66</sup> Although there have been waves of resistance to Bourdieu in France and elsewhere, his influence continues to grow around the world.<sup>67</sup> Theologians increasingly appreciate the sophistication of his studies of power and culture, in which exhaustive empirical research is seamlessly interwoven with systematic theoretical reflection.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, he is often praised, though sometimes vilified, as a rare example of a popular intellectual who is as known for his scientific output as he is for his political activity.<sup>69</sup> This combination of theoretical insight, empirical grounding, and political engagement recommends his sociology as a useful resource for approaching the revisionary task.

The respect and popularity currently enjoyed by Bourdieu are, perhaps, sufficient reasons for drawing him in as a conversation partner—though, given Yoder's disregard for popularity, they are also possible reasons for avoiding him. Yet there is, at times, a deep resonance between the two thinkers: both refused to separate theoretical construction from empirical research; both wrote largely for practical, rather than theoretical, purposes; both were engaged in attempts to change the communities that were the subject of their work; both embrace historicity and particularity against what Bourdieu calls a "false universalism"; and both were allergic to common sense dualisms that ruled out their preferred form of politics as impossible. Stronger evidence for the fruitfulness of bringing them together, however, is found in the ways Bourdieu's highly sophisticated writings on

66. See, e.g., Kauppi, *French Intellectual Nobility*; Kauppi, "Sociologist as *Moraliste*."

67. Dubois, Durand, and Winkin, eds., *Réception internationale*.

68. Pilario, *Rough Grounds of Praxis*; Smith, "Redeeming Critique"; Tanner, *Theories of Culture*; Ward, *Cultural Transformation*; Ward, "Postmodernism and Postmodernity." See also Flanagan, "Sociology into Theology."

69. See chapter 5 below on Bourdieu's politics.

## *Introduction*

social structure and power can be used to prod Yoder's sociological theology in a non-reductive direction. Each of the chapters below provides an overview of some of Bourdieu's major concepts, selected for their relevance to the topic at hand. Although criticisms of those concepts are referenced throughout the book, they are rarely the focus—the purpose, after all, is to revise Yoder, not Bourdieu.

The deployment of a secular sociologist to revise a (possibly secularizing) theologian might seem like a strange, if not impotent, solution. There is no attempt here to hide from the full secular strangeness of Bourdieu's work, yet little effort is made to criticize or correct explicitly this strangeness. The Bourdieusian revisions to Yoder's sociological theology already gesture toward a possible theological transfiguration of reflexive sociology, but a full transfiguration awaits further explication. The presentation of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, therefore, is mindful of his secularism, as well as its other potential problems, but does not regard them as absolute barriers to constructive appropriation. Throughout the book Bourdieu's concepts are called upon to revise Yoder's social theoretical assumptions in order that they might become non-reductive in terms of method, morals, and metaphysics.

In brief, once Bourdieu's understanding of society as a set of objective relations is incorporated into Yoder's theology of the principalities and powers, society can be regarded as fundamentally related to God, its creator and sustainer. This move opens trinitarian pathways that are followed throughout the book to move beyond Yoder's sociological reductionism. Relational sociology also demands a non-reductive methodology, for claims about any one sociological phenomenon must take into account its full set of relations to other phenomena. The relational approach requires a more intimate dialectic between theoretical construction and empirical research than Yoder's sometimes ideologically charged methods allow for. Finally, Bourdieu's political concepts give sociological clarity and weight to Yoder's ethics, and strengthen his argument that the nonviolent politics of Jesus are a fully responsible, universal, and Christian form of life.

Agreeing with critics that Yoder's legacy is not always identical to Jesus' presumes some understanding of Jesus' legacy that is not derived exclusively from Yoder's writings. For the most part, this book takes Yoder's work as a reliable guide to Jesus and the Christian faith, and the revisions draw as much on that work as possible. As already indicated, the theology of the principalities and powers works well as a focus here precisely because it motions beyond the methodological, moral, and sociological reductions that plague other of Yoder's themes, even if it does not completely overcome them. At times, however, it is necessary to revise Yoder by correcting his

theology, not simply by revising the latent social theoretical assumptions in his work. The social theoretical revisions may clear the way for theological revisions that are more clearly Yoderian than alternatives, but they cannot supply the improved theology. In cases where strictly theological questions are at issue, the bias in this book is always to side with the core creedal logic: God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Jesus is fully God and fully human. Although, as mentioned above, there is much debate over whether or not Yoder sided with the creeds, it is questionable if his christocentric sociological theology makes any sense without them. Why base a community on the politics of Jesus unless he uniquely discloses the politics of God? This question is raised both by Yoder's critics who charge him with abandoning the creeds, and by his defenders who argue (or assume) that he remained creedal. Without a more robust affirmation of the creeds, Yoder would seem to be in danger of reducing theological convictions to existential symbols or regulative principles.

In his critique of postliberal regulative accounts of doctrine, John Milbank suggests that exclusively focusing on Christian narratives and practices is like describing a drama without reference to its historical or mythical setting.<sup>70</sup> Just as the drama only makes sense in light of some description of its setting, Christian practice only makes sense in light of an account of the transcendent reality that always exceeds it. Rational debate about the transcendent—Is God triune, or does God only appear that way? Is Jesus God and human, or just one or the other?—cannot be extracted from the “grammar” of the Christian faith. That admission need not lead in a speculative direction or to the search for rational “foundations” external to the faith. From a theological perspective, human knowledge of God emerges from the history of God's self-revelation in creation.<sup>71</sup> Even “natural” knowledge of God, as Paul suggests to the Athenians, is only possible because God created, sustains, and is active in the world (Acts 17:22–31). The process of constructing metaphysical propositions in order to make the faith intelligible, therefore, is a process of faith itself. In other words, adequate statements about God are a possible product of participation in the history of God's self-revelation. Cosmology and the Christian life cannot be separated.<sup>72</sup>

70. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 385. Milbank is criticizing Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, which attempts to move liberalism beyond “experiential expressive” accounts of doctrine to a regulative view. See also Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 113–30, for constructive criticism of Lindbeck's treatment of conservative propositionalism.

71. This perspective is developed in chapter 1 below as an explication of Yoder's own views, especially as presented in his *Preface*.

72. For sustained philosophical arguments that theological knowledge is rooted

## Introduction

The perspective taken in this book is that the creedal affirmations of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ are faithful developments within Jesus' legacy by communities that participated in the history of God's self-revelation. Where Yoder does not clearly affirm them, his work is revised to do so. Although some readers might regard this move as a work of heretical inheritance of Yoder's legacy, not to mention Jesus', it can be pointed out that there is a considerable textual basis within Yoder's writings for doing so, and, besides, there is no way to satisfy every reader. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the creedal revisions of Yoder's legacy contained herein gain wide assent among his readers, precisely because they are intended as constructive revisions to his sociological theology. Yoder's reluctance to elaborate creedal metaphysics stems from his fear that such elaboration distracts from concrete obedience. The doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ have indeed been subject to much speculation, but they are developed below through continual attention to the social practices of Jesus and the church. The principalities and powers exist in relation to God, and so the social and the spiritual cannot be neatly separated. The practical is spiritual, and vice versa. Once all the relations that constitute the principalities and powers are admitted, then Yoder's sociological theology can be revised to avoid methodological, moral, and metaphysical reductions, even as it maintains his characteristic focus on imitating the politics of Jesus. Such a revision, it is hoped, will contribute not only to the spread of Yoder's influence, but of Jesus', too.

---

in the life of believing communities, see F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*; Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*; and Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology*.