Modern Theology 37:1 January 2021
ISSN 0266-7177 (Print)
ISSN 1468-0025 (Online)

DOI:10.1111/moth.126

THE ECCLESIAL ETHICS OF JOHN HOWARD YODER'S ABUSE

ISAAC SAMUEL VILLEGAS

Abstract

In the last decade – now that his sexual abuse is no longer deniable – Christian ethicists have had to reconsider John Howard Yoder's theological contributions in the late twentieth century. This essay considers how the witness of the women who survived his abuse exposes the sexism latent in his development of a framework for moral discernment and community discipline. Yoder designed an ecclesiology that was congruent with his pursuit of unaccountable power over the women he used as subjects for working out his exploitative sexuality. His theological contributions, I argue, cannot be separated from his behavior.

Introduction

"The ultimate meaning of history is to be found in the work of the church," John Howard Yoder declared at the beginning of his career.[1] According to Yoder, a practice fundamental to the work of the church is the process of binding and loosing people who have sinned – an act of God revealed through communal discernment, a conversation that pronounces the meaning of God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Yoder wrote about binding and loosing first in 1964 as a brief reflection in the Mennonite Church's denominational magazine, *Gospel Herald*, then later as a study of Matthew 18:15-20 in a 1967 *Concern* pamphlet, and finally as the first chapter of his last book published during his lifetime, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*.[2] "In this key passage of Matthew's Gospel," Yoder explained in *Body Politics*, "Jesus instructed his disciples that when they would carry out this particular practice, following

Isaac Samuel Villegas
Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, PO Box 2145, Chapel Hill, NC 27515, USA
Email: isaac.villegas@gmail.com

[1] John H. Yoder, *Peace Without Eschatology?*, Concern Reprint Series (Scottdale, PA: The Concern Group, 1961), 10. As he noted in each re-publication of this essay, Yoder first presented this argument as a conference paper in the Netherlands in 1953. Subsequently, the essay appeared in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971) and *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

[2] John H. Yoder, "Church Discipline," *Gospel Herald*, August 18, 1964 (vol. 57, no. 32), 709-10. John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," *Concern*, no. 14, A Pamphlet Series for Questions of Church Renewal (Scottdale, PA: The Concern Group, 1967), 2-32. John H. Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 1-13. John White and Ken Blue included a revised version of Yoder's 1967 *Concern* essay as an appendix to their *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985). Michael Cartwright also included the essay in his volume of Yoder's collected writings, *Royal Priesthood*.

these simple instructions, their activity would at the same time be the activity of God. 'What you bind on earth is bound in heaven,' he said (Matt. 18:18)."[3]

Yoder used a version of this argument to dispute representatives of Mennonite institutions when they undertook disciplinary procedures to censure him.[4] As I will show, he revised his biblical exegesis to resist ecclesial protocols that attempted to hold him accountable for his sexual abuse of women. Here, Yoder's published thoughts intersected with his injurious behavior, thus erasing the line between his life and work – a frustration for current efforts to use his written theology without attending to the linkages in his life that connected his mind to his body, his theories to his actions, his words to his deeds.[5]

The witness of the women he violated led me to re-read his corpus and visit his archives; I allowed his pattern of abusive behavior to elucidate patterns in his theology.[6] This essay documents the theological rationalizations Yoder offered as he groomed women for his abuse and justified himself when confronted with his wrongdoing. The

[3] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 1.

[4] See Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80. "For years Marlin E. Miller, president of Goshen Biblical Seminary, had been confronting Yoder about his 'relationships' with women, and the two Christian theologians were now engaged in a tug of words over how the conflict between Yoder's experimentation and seminary interests might be resolved by a faithful application of Matthew 18" (12).

[5] For example, "Yoder was too brilliant to know how to relate to us 'normal folk,'" Marva Dawn claims, thus proposing "a more positive basis not to let his sexual misconduct interfere with our appreciation of his theological contributions." See Marva Dawn, "Forward," in *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian*, edited by J. Denny Weaver (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), xii. While Ted Grimsrud at first commends the scrutiny of Yoder's theology through the lens of his abuse ("we surely do need to consider the possible implications of his problematic behavior for how he construed theology"), he exempts himself from the need to do so: "I still tend to suspect that the roots of Yoder's actions lie elsewhere than his theology and are not likely to be visible in the theology . . . [Yoder's ideas] remain perceptive and helpful regardless of what I learn about his life. This makes the details of his life of less interest to me theologically. Those details are interesting, of course, but the interest runs the risk of being prurient and to that extent should probably not be cultivated." See Ted Grimsrud, "Reflections from a Chagrined 'Yoderian' in Face of His Sexual Violence," in *Radical Theologian*, 349-50. In contrast, Jaime Pitts remarks: "In Yoder's case, abusive behavior and theological vision coalesce as a problematic 'sexual politics' whose features must be accounted for so that their ongoing force may be resisted and recurrence avoided." See Jaime Pitts, "Anabaptist Re-Vision: On John Howard Yoder's Misrecognized Sexual Politics," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 156.

[6] A common tendency is to salvage Yoder's theology from his abuse by explaining the connection as hypocrisy – that Yoder did not live up to the promise of his words, that his harmful behavior contradicted the goodness of his theology. For example, David Cramer, Jenny Howell, Paul Martens, and Jonathan Tran write: "when judged by standards internal to his own writing, what Yoder did makes a lie of what he said. Yet, rather than entirely dismissing what he said, we take certain aspects of his theology to be constructive and even hopeful in the wake of the devastation his actions have caused so many." Yoder therefore becomes his own judge, he condemns himself: "we think that the best way to begin to examine Yoder's behavior is through the theological lenses Yoder himself gave us, and to thereby assess the continuity between what he said and what he did." See "Scandalizing John Howard Yoder," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology & Culture*, July 7, 2014, https://theotherjournal.com/2014/07/07/scandalizing-john-howard-yoder/. Their method allows Yoder to construct the framework within which to consider his life. Yoder sets the terms of the discussion, thus enabling others to rely on him to provide helpful coordinates for theological investigations. For a recent example, see Jeremy Garber's *Another Way: Thinking Together about the Holy Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), where he cites Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran as warrant for "correcting Yoder's thought to redeem it," although Garber misattributes the authorship of the essay to Jaime Pitts (xvi-xvii). Similarly, J. Denny Weaver identifies a theological kernel worth preserving within the husk of Yoder's life, an irreproachable logic that exposes the hypocrisy of his actions: "There is however a consistent methodology, that of taking the narrative of Jesus into any milieu and using it to address any question. And posthumously it also challenges his own conduct, which fell well short of expectations" See J. Denny Weaver, *Radical Theologian*, 375. Yoder gets it right, according to Weaver, despite his actions, which his ethics expose as unethical. Likewise, Gerald Mast calls for exploring how Yoder the person betrayed Yoder the theologian: "to consider John Howard Yoder's failure to live up to his own theology." See Gerald Mast, "Sin and Failure in Anabaptist Theology," in *Radical Theologian*, 352.

research I conducted in the Mennonite Church USA's John Howard Yoder archives, which now include de-classified files of his disciplinary proceedings, focused on his reflections on binding and loosing.[7] As evident in his correspondence with colleagues and victims, his published work on moral discernment provided justifications for his abusive relationships. I will argue that Yoder developed and refined a process for church discipline as moral discernment that facilitated his sexualized violence, allowing thereby his ecclesiology to become an accomplice to his abuse. Yoder's latent deployment of patriarchal power will be made explicit throughout my argument.[8]

In the wake of Ruth Elizabeth Krall's 2013 book, *The Elephant in God's Living Room, Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder* and Rachel Waltner Goossen's 2015 essay in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* – along with the advocacy work of Barbra Graber and Carolyn Holderread Heggen – readers have been grappling with Yoder's legacy for at least the last decade.[9] Many of us whose early theological education involved reading and thinking with Yoder about church life are now boxing up his books, storing them in attics or tossing them into recycling bins. Out of sight, out of mind – as if emptying our shelves of his writings would exorcize his voice from our heads.[10] Theologians who take seriously the survivors of Yoder's abuse are uneasy about linking their projects to his. I resonate with this desire to dismiss his corpus from how we think and what we write because we (especially men) do not want to transmit his violent sexism into our work, into our lives.[11] But I am hesitant to absolve myself of him without a reckoning because Yoder's influence has already been internalized in a whole system of thought. Repression allows a legacy to continue in secret. Yoderian habits inform a field of scholarship – arguments, methods, styles of theological ethics – even

[7] I am grateful for the hospitality and assistance of Jason Kauffman, the director of archives for Mennonite Church USA in Elkhart, Indiana.

[8] Lisa Schirch identifies an undercurrent of patriarchy in Yoder's theology: "Given the pervasiveness of institutionalized patriarchy, it would be surprising if Yoder's writing did not reflect patriarchal beliefs." See Lisa Schirch, "Afterword," in *Radical Theologian*, 382. By contrast, Karen Guth attempts to reclaim "a Yoder who – despite his own profound personal failure to live out the commitment in his own life – authored a theology that posits feminism as intrinsic to Christian identity." See Karen V. Guth, *Christian Ethics at the Boundary: Feminism and Theologies of Public Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 118. For a criticism of Guth's use of Yoder's theology in the context of sexual violence, see Hilary Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, "Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities," *Religion Compass* 13, no. 9 (September 2019), where they offer this warning: "the kind of argument Guth puts forward risks positing Yoder as a solution to the problem of sexual violence. Doing so places a perpetrator of sexual violence in a salvific position with respect to those injured by this kind of violence. It is an approach that reinscribes the systemic power dynamics of sexual violence by preserving a perpetrator's authority over the lives and thought-worlds of the people who are vulnerable to the impact of his wrongs" (7).

[9] Ruth Elizabeth Krall, *The Elephant in God's Living Room, Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays* (N.p.: Enduring Space, 2013), http://ruthkrall.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Elephants-in-God's-Living-Room-Vol-3-©.pdf (accessed February 24, 2015).

[10] Gerald Schlabach empathizes with, as he puts it, my generation's concerns regarding Yoder's legacy: "So existentially I can understand the calls from younger Mennonite scholars to do peace theology without relying on Yoder. And if a middle course is at least to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion about the ways his patriarchy and worse might have shaped his theology, I've been doing this in my own way." However, he continues, "I just don't see how they/we can do without him." See Gerald W. Schlabach, "Only Those We Need Can Betray Us: My Relationship with John Howard Yoder and His Legacy," *GeraldSchlabach.Net* [blog], July 10, 2014, https://www.geraldschlabach.net/2014/07/10/only-those-we-need-can-betray-us-my-relationship-with-john-howard-yoder-and-his-legacy/.

[11] As Janna Hunter-Bowman has cautioned, "If we shy away from adequately wrestling with what he wrote, we are likely to re-ingrain theological categories that enable and shelter violence." See Janna L. Hunter Bowman, "The Opportunity Stanley Hauerwas Missed," *The Christian Century* [blog], October 16, 2017, https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/opportunity-stanley-hauerwas-missed.

when he is not cited.[12] For Mennonites, for pastors, for North American peace theologians, to reckon with Yoder's legacy involves self-examination: to notice where he has slipped into our theological mannerisms, to consider the nexus of his abuse and theology, and to wonder if the thought-world of his sexual violence has come along as a stowaway in our own work, his abusive inclinations as the underside of what we have learned to treasure of his corpus.[13]

Others have called for this kind of examination: to consider his abuse and his theology within the same purview.[14] "Yoder's sexual misconduct toward so many women is not something that should be treated as just a personal flaw and be separated from his pacifist views," Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite has argued. Consequently, "Pacifism needs to examine its own deep inheritance in misogyny."[15] Yoder's violences twist through peace theologies, according to Thistlethwaite; therefore, the call is for an unraveling – not an attempt to separate the pure threads from the damaged ones, as if the fibers were not blended materials from the beginning, but to let the revelations about his life fray the theology he has fabricated. Similarly, Peter Dula observes about Yoder that "[t]here is no straight line of determination between life and work." There are instead "countless crooked and tangled threads,"[16] and to press into the tangles is to loosen the hold of Yoder's theology on us. To switch metaphors, Malinda E. Berry has compared Yoder's lingering effect on Mennonite conversations – as well as the peace tradition within the guild of theological ethics – to a wounded body: "John Howard Yoder is our collective, metaphorical 'unremoved shrapnel.' How we remove it is just as important as understanding how the injury occurred and why we have lived with the embedded fragments for so long."[17] To ignore the fragments lodged in the body prevents the development of a renewed corpus of peace theology.

---

[12] Gerald Schlabach describes the situation in the field of Christian ethics as follows: "But here's the excruciating dilemma that I think names how some of us can simultaneously feel such an abiding sense of debt to Yoder and an all-the-deeper sense of betrayal: 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. So too with Christian pacifism more widely perhaps, but certainly Mennonite peace theology in particular." See Schlabach, "Only Those We Need Can Betray Us."

[13] Karen Guth notes the widespread effect of Yoder's violations: "Yoder's family and his local and larger Mennonite ecclesial and academic communities are also harmed by his wrongdoing. At the same time, many of Yoder's ecclesial and academic communities are also complicit in his wrongdoing." See Karen V. Guth, "Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder: Restorative Justice Resources in Witness and Feminist Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2015): 123.

[14] Carolyn Holderread Heggen observes that, generally speaking, "[t]here is a relationship between abuse and theology." See Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Response," in *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, Occasional Papers no. 16, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 75.

[15] Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 157. Stanley Hauerwas also suggests that further exploration is needed regarding the connection between Yoder's behavior and his pacifist arguments: "What I do know, however, is that we cannot avoid the question of whether his justification for his sexual behaviour is structurally similar to his defence of Christian nonviolence." See Stanley Hauerwas, "In defence of 'our respectable culture': Trying to make sense of John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse," *ABC Religion & Ethics*, October 18, 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/in-defence-of-our-respectable-culture-trying-to-make-sense-of-jo/10095302. Karen Guth, in conversation with Christian ethicists, encourages members of the field to "do justice to Yoder's legacy by collaborating in the development of a feminist pacifist politics." See Guth, "Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder," 131.

[16] Peter Dula, "Psychology, Ecclesiology, and Yoder's Violence," *Mennonite Life* 68 (May 2014), https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-68/article/psychology-ecclesiology-and-yoders-violence/.

[17] Malinda E. Berry, "Avoiding Avoidance: Why I Assigned *Body Politics* this Spring," *Mennonite Life* 68 (May 2014), https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-68/article/avoiding-avoidance-why-i-assigned-body-politics-th/.

The Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary[18] faculty has taken seriously its institution's role in Yoder's legacy and has called for a reevaluation of his work through the lens of his violence. The faculty's 2018 statement reads: "we deeply regret the hurt he inflicted and commit to reexamining his theology in light of that damage"; "we agree that [t]he relationship between Yoder's influential work on theology, ethics, and peace and his violent behavior are open for examination by faculty and students."[19] This invitation for a biographical-theological investigation echoes the summons Ruth Krall offered in *The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder*, where she asked whether others were willing "to re-visit the corpus of Yoder's ethical, ecclesial, missional, and theological work to see if, where and how his theology has been stunted, twisted, misshapen, or otherwise damaged by his long-term management of his personal life."[20] The critical engagement of Yoder's work in this essay takes up Krall's call: that is, to discern how his abusive behavior played out in his theology.

Disciplinary Protocols

In 1967, in the early decades of his theological career, Yoder published his Matthean argument for church discipline as part of the *Concern* pamphlet series.[21] In 1992, five years before his death, he reprised his interpretation of Matthew 18 for *Body Politics*. He called it "binding and loosing,"[22] based on Jesus' commissioning of his disciples: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:19). *To bind and to loose* was Yoder's shorthand for a communal process of moral discernment, where one person confronts another who has sinned in order to restore that person to the community. If this one-on-one encounter proves unsuccessful at first, the conversation is widened to include others from the community. Throughout the process – as he outlined it in his 1967 version – Yoder leans toward the need to sublimate the offence and restore the offender to an inclusive community: "It is thus the responsibility of every person – of the offender, of the offended,

[18] For most of his career, Yoder served on the faculty of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (formerly called Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary), which began in 1958 as a partnership between Goshen Biblical Seminary and the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, before merging into a unified institution in 1993.

[19] AMBS Teaching Faculty, "Statement on Teaching and Scholarship Related to John Howard Yoder," Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, October 1, 2018, https://campussuite-storage.s3.amazonaws.com/prod/11168/c72da489-1ca3-11e6-b537-22000bd8490f/1843477/5a11bbfc-d607-11e8-b027-0a55d3468af6/file/AMBS-Teaching-Scholarship-Yoder.pdf.

[20] Krall, *The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder*, 187.

[21] For the history of the Concern movement within the Mennonite Church, see Nathan Hershberger, "Power, Tradition, and Renewal: The *Concern* Movement and the Fragmented Institutionalization of Mennonite Life," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87, no. 2 (April 2013): 155-86. Also see the chapter on "Bender and the Concern Group" in Albert N. Keim's biography, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 450-71. Yoder first drafted his argument regarding binding and loosing as part of the Conrad Grebel Lecture series at Goshen College scheduled for the fall of 1962. He postponed his lectureship for one year, then a second year, until he finally withdrew from the commitment in 1964; but he kept the initial drafts of his lectures, one of which he had entitled "Binding and Loosing." Yoder included a draft in a letter of October 10, 1962. In previous correspondence with Nelson Kauffman (February 9, 1961), Yoder presented the title as "The Ministry of Forgiveness (Matt. 18)" and provided the following outline: "A. Discipline as essential. B. Discipline as non-legalistic. C. Discipline as situation ethics. D. Discipline as normative ethics. E. Discipline as the work of the Holy Spirit. F. The loss of discipline in Protestantism and Mennonitism." John H. Yoder, "Conrad Grebel Lectures," 1960-1961. Box 37, Folder 16, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048, Mennonite Church USA Archives–Elkhart, Indiana.

[22] Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," *Concern*, no. 14.

of every informed third party in the Christian fellowship – when aware of any kind of offense, to take initiative toward the restoration of fellowship."[23] Each member of the community bears the responsibility to return the offender to church life. According to Yoder, the purpose of this process is restoration, not the protection of vulnerable people from harm.

A theology of divine grace justifies these relational procedures. Human forgiveness mimics God's activity. "Man can go to his brother only as God came to him; not counting his trespass against him. Forgiveness does not brush the offense off with a 'think nothing of it'; it absorbs the offense in suffering love."[24] Communities should absorb transgressors because God welcomes sinners. Yoder developed this position from the biblical theme of suffering servanthood, a motif "which stretches from Hosea and Isaiah 42, 49, 52-3 through Christ himself to the cross-bearing of his disciples."[25] The church participates in this movement of God's grace through undertaking the work of restoration, of reunion. The offer of divine forgiveness, of suffering love, of reintegrative mercy, marks a community as the site of God's redemption. "To be human is to be in conflict, to offend and to be offended," Yoder claimed. "To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it."[26] The absorption of the offender through forgiveness is a sign of God's presence in the community. Here the register of Yoder's language shifts attention from the person to the act. He separates the sinner from the sin. "It [forgiveness] absorbs the offence in suffering love." Nouns are rendered impersonal. Verbs describe conceptual procedures, not human subjectivity. The grammar erases people from the process. Interpersonal conflict is depersonalized. "The offence" and "suffering love" become abstractions, placeholders in Yoder's development of a reified schematic for moral deliberations. In his outline of this disciplinary process, Yoder did not consider the safety of the one who had been sinned against – no mention of the needs of the victim, no discussion of the trauma of survivors as they undergo this process, no description of a plan to protect others from the offender while the community provides time for reconciliation.

Instead he assigned himself the task, as a theological ethicist, of developing a scriptural method for adjudicating the rules that govern a faith community – a formal procedure to determine where to adjust behavioral codes over time, protocols for discerning when to modify communal morality according to changing contexts. Yoder offered his exegesis of Matthew 18 as delineating a process for Christians to figure out which taboos should be preserved and which should be adapted, what behavior to permit and what to prohibit. Yoder was interested in congregations as sites of moral experimentation, not

[23] Ibid., 12.

[24] Ibid., 30.

[25] Ibid. This was a central tenet for Yoder's theology of conflict resolution. As he put it in his contribution to the Mennonite Central Committee's Peace Theology consultation in Kansas City, April 6-8, 1978: "Paul's third argument [in 1 Corinthians 6] is that the Christian ought to be willing to suffer: 'why not accept being mistreated?' This is the ethic of the cross." John H. Yoder, "A Theological Point of Reference for an Approach to Conflict, Intervention, and Conciliation," 1978, 4. Box A, Folder 38, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048.

[26] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 13.

in communities as contributing to healthy selfhood.[27] "Conversation with reconciling intent is the most powerful way for a community to discover when the rules they have been applying are inadequate, so that they may be modified."[28] Yoder centered his ethics on the quest to revise social norms, the modification of rules: "to see" in New Testament texts "paths of change without infidelity, fidelity without rigidity."[29] The purpose of his ethical enterprise was to challenge, test, confirm, or change "the group's standards."[30] He overlooked the people who endured the harm, the victimized who suffered from the ordeal.

Experimental Ethics

Yoder fixed his eyes on developing a framework for ethical deliberation liberated from the status quo, loosed from the established morality. He envisioned a mode of discernment that would transcend the presumed validity of majoritarian social codes. He set his sights on free church ecclesiology as the locus for experiments in God's newness. He theorized a style of life unchained from the epistemological authority of the world and therefore receptive to God's social interventions – a hope in new creation, communities revising their ethics through the power of Jesus, who promised his involvement in the ongoing work of binding and loosing: "A transcendent moral ratification is claimed for the decisions made in the conversation of two or three or more," Yoder explained in his mid-career essay, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood." In that essay he returned again to Matthew 18, linking his repeated argument to a vision for transcendence. He postulated an ecclesial collective that would reach beyond the confines of the relational politics of this world.[31]

The church as the site of ethical transcendence runs as a thematic undercurrent through his corpus. As Yoder wrote in an earlier collection, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, "The relevance of a transcendent hope is sometimes that of a *pioneer* . . . Christians can undertake pilot efforts in education and other types of social

[27] Yoder claimed that concerns about the formation of a healthy sense of self were a distraction from the revolutionary character of the gospel. Christianity "is in constant danger of confusing the kingdom itself with the benefits of the kingdom. If anyone repents, if anyone turns around to follow Jesus in this new way of life, this will do something for the aimlessness of his life. It will do something for his loneliness by giving him fellowship. It will do something for his anxiety and guilt by giving him a good conscience. . . BUT ALL OF THIS IS NOT THE GOSPEL. This is just the bonus, the wrapping paper thrown in when you buy the meat . . ." Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 32. As if repurposing Adolf von Harnack's kernel/husk schema for his ecclesiological vision, Yoder considered the publicness of the gospel to be the kernel, while everything else comprised the psychological husk. Alex Sider notes Yoder's lack of an account of a moral psychology in his ecclesiology. "At precisely the point where [the practices of the church] shape the psyche, Yoder turns away from undertaking the exposition of a rational psychology and to the task of the community, which he describes in social process terms." The result, Sider observes, "is to short-circuit reflection on selfhood." J. Alexander Sider, "Friendship, Alienation, Love: Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 3 (July 2010): 438.

[28] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 6.

[29] Ibid., 10.

[30] Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 6.

[31] John H. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective on Practical Moral Reasoning," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 50; cf. John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 27.

service because, differing from public agencies, they can afford the risk of failure."[32] Christian hope, according to Yoder, empowers the church to explore unfamiliar frontiers, to experiment with pilot social programs exceeding the constraints of public structures, of political institutions, of civic accountability and responsibility to constituents. He claimed that these ecclesial pioneer projects "can afford the risk of failure." He did not, however, explain why churches have less on the line than public institutions and are therefore afforded the luxury of engaging in risky social experiments. Nor did he provide an account of who exactly would be harmed if experiments fail, nor why such collateral damage would be justifiable. To Yoder, this transcendent freedom from systems of worldly power allows the church to be the church.

A decade later, in an essay included in *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder repeated his idea about "pilot programs," although this time clarifying the nature of the risk: "The church is more able to experiment because not all ministries need to pay off. She can take the risk of losing or failing, more than can those who are in charge of the state."[33] In other words: congregations can be risky, government agencies cannot. Furthermore, Yoder once again neglected to clarify the appropriate criteria by which to decide whether a social experiment would be a success or a failure; he did not indicate who would bear the responsibility to adjudicate, and he took no notice of who suffers or is injured when the church fails. Instead, he focused his vision on delineating ecclesial sites of avant-garde ethical discernment. He designed a social arrangement in which entrepreneurial communities – freed from webs of accountability – conduct secular experiments, hoping to wander into the gospel's promises for the church as "a foretaste of the peace for which the world was made."[34]

His ecclesiology was entangled in his peace theology. Free church institutions are especially apt for this creative nonviolence, Yoder asserted, because of their minoritarian identity – Anabaptism as a disestablished minority among Christian traditions. "It is the function of minority communities to remember and create utopian visions. There is no hope for society without an awareness of transcendence."[35] According to Yoder, a community's minority status enables an epistemological vantage point to glimpse a hope for peace that transcends the present configuration of society – a marginalized collectivity as the condition of possibility for utopian imaginations. "Nonconformity is

[32] Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 163. He first articulated this vision in 1964, when he argued that the church is "to be the 'pilot' creating experimentally new ways of meeting social needs . . . [and that] her ministry [is to be] one of constant inventive vision for the good of the larger society." John H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 19-20. Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran all consider Yoder's personal revolution of sexual ethics through the lens of his discussion of pilot programs. See their "Scandalizing John Howard Yoder." Jaime Pitts also connects Yoder's formulation of the "pilot" function of the church to his rationalization of his sexual "experiments." See Jaime Pitts, "Anabaptist Re-Vision: On John Howard Yoder's Misrecognition of Sexual Politics," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 165. See also Paul Martens and David Cramer, "By What Criteria Does a 'Grand, Noble Experiment' Fail? What the Case of John Howard Yoder Reveals about the Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 180-81, 184-85.

Regarding his adoption of the word "pioneer" to characterize his free church ecclesiology, Yoder included a clipping in his files of a 1970 news article in *Christianity Today* about Myron and David Augsburger as emblematic of a movement within the Mennonite tradition in North America which the author calls "Pioneer Nonconformists." See Russell Chandler, "The Mennonites: Pioneer Nonconformists," *Christianity Today*, September 11, 1970, 44-46. See Box 36, Folder 40, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048.

[33] Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 92.

[34] Ibid., 94.

[35] Ibid.

the warrant for the promise of another world," Yoder continued on the same page. "The church cultivates an alternative consciousness."[36]

He borrowed this insight from the liberation theology produced in base ecclesial communities in Latin America, where theologians declared the "epistemological privilege of the oppressed," which Yoder summarized as follows: "if you see things from below, you see them as God does . . . It is that being on the top of the heap consistently keeps one from seeing things as they are."[37] Like base ecclesial communities, Yoder positioned his countercultural congregations as minority collectives divinely suited for pilot projects, as subaltern cohorts favorably located to explore neglected ethical terrain. He envisioned – as he remarked in a 1973 essay on liberation theology – "the creative construction of relatively independent counter communities," the "saving message of the resident minority."[38] He appropriated the epistemic status of these base ecclesial communities, which was a presumptuous conceit given the privilege of his predominantly white, European community in the United States. He claimed that to venture into the wider world would moderate his similarly minoritarian edge, even though in reality he benefited from a cosmopolitan identity as a U.S. citizen with academic credentials from a European center of intellectual life (Yoder earned a doctoral degree in theology from the University of Basel in Switzerland).

Yoder offered his "binding and loosing" process as a way to unburden Christian communities from the stranglehold of cultural norms, of social structures, of ecclesial recalcitrance – a convergence of institutionalized assumptions diffused throughout the moral landscape that, in his view, stifle ethical discernment and suppress collectivities from imagining new configurations for life together. His theology of social change accounted for the repressive function of a majority's hold on cultural mores. This sociological frame, as part of Yoder's vision for moral discernment, proved useful in cultivating distrust of accountability processes from beyond his self-selected in-group. His ethics of moral experimentation served to render the criticism of strangers to his collective as an infringement upon the independence crucial for liberative deliberation.

This structure for discernment allowed Yoder to dismiss the rebuke of people who confronted him with the dangers of his sexual ethics – dangers which he considered to be worth the risk, given the promise of a Christian revolution of sexual relations. Ethical

[36] Ibid.

[37] John H. Yoder, "The Burden and the Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism," in *Nonviolent America: History through the Eyes of Peace*, edited by Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke (North Newton, KA: Bethel College, 1993), 34-35. Yoder discussed the "epistemological privilege of the poor" in his essay, "Firstfruits: The Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 32, 35, 44. This posture also served as the guiding insight for his 1996 essay, "On Not Being in Charge," where he explained in the introduction: "the substance of my assignment will be to narrate the experiences of some people from the underside of history, in order to concretize how reasonable the view from below can seem under certain circumstances, which in fact are not rare but typical." See John H. Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, edited by Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 168. In other words, as he wrote elsewhere, "Tolstoy was right: progress in history is borne by the underdogs" (Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 137).

[38] John H. Yoder, "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 300, 307. Yoder explored Latin American liberation theology in three other essays: "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* 1, no. 3 (September 1985); "Withdrawal and Diaspora: The Two Faces of Liberation," in *Freedom and Discipleship: Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective*, ed. Daniel S. Schipani (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); "'Commentary': The Wider Setting of 'Liberation Theology,'" *Review of Politics* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1990). The 1989 essay is a repeat publication of the one published in 1973, although without acknowledgment. Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz edited for posthumous publication a set of lectures where Yoder engages with Latin American theology: *Revolutionary Christianity: The 1966 South American Lectures* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

life on the cutting edge of discovery, according to Yoder, would involve a calculated risk. Even when experiments fail, he argued, the results serve to refine the procedures, thus providing opportunities to revise the hypotheses.[39] Ostensibly, the anticipation of discovery would justify the regrettable bodily harm along the way.

Abusive Masculinity

With this formulation of church discipline and moral discernment in place, Yoder's path was cleared to embark on a theological adventure, which involved luring others into becoming subjects in his experiments. As a survivor of Yoder's sexual abuse reported in 1992, "One of the lines he's used on a number of women I've met is, 'We are on the cutting edge. We are developing some new models for the church. We are part of this grand, noble experiment. The Christian church will be indebted to us for years to come.'"[40]

Yoder promised the exhilaration of discovery in service to the church, a holy thrill. And when women who recognized his manipulative behavior would reject his overtures, Yoder would demean their intelligence, positioning his own theologically infused sexual praxis as beyond their stunted moral capacity. A group of women reported their experiences of Yoder's insults, providing a confidential statement to the ecclesial committee responsible for his oversight: "To one of us he said, 'I thought you were more mature,' to another 'I thought you were more sophisticated,' and to another 'I thought you were bright enough to understand this.' To another he said, 'You've totally misinterpreted my behavior.' . . . 'I wouldn't fuck you.'"[41]

When Marlin E. Miller – president of AMBS, Yoder's employer – confronted the professor with allegations of sexual misconduct, Yoder responded by categorizing Miller's concerns as cultural conformity. In a private letter to Miller, Yoder wrote: "the great difficulty – intellectually the great challenge – is how to deal with a basic challenge to an entire cultural mind set. All of Anny's arguments, most of those of Mary Ellen, and numerous of yours represent simply an appeal to the consensus of our respectable culture. I know what that consensus teaches, for I am its product and victim. I knew its teachings before I began testing an alternative set of axioms . . . Therefore any further appeals to that consensus . . . is at best circular, and at worst it supports my analysis."[42] Miller's reservations derived, according to Yoder, from his acquiescence to the social conventions of respectability. Because Miller's moral sensibilities were too indebted to the customs of the age, Yoder refused to follow the dictates of what he conceived to be

[39] See the end of the section entitled "Evasive Exceptionalism" below.

[40] Tom Price, "Yoder's action framed in writings," *The Elkhart Truth*, July 15, 1992. The survivor, who was unidentified in Price's news report, identified herself in Mark Oppenheimer's "A Theologian's Influence, and Stained Past, Live On," *New York Times*, October 11, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/12/us/john-howard-yoders-dark-past-and-influence-lives-on-for-mennonites.html.

[41] Anonymous, "Confidential Statement," February 21-22, 1992, 4. Box 1, Folder 4, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001, Mennonite Church USA Archives – Elkhart, Indiana.

[42] Memo from John H. Yoder to Marlin E. Miller, December 31, 1979. Box 1, Folder 6, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 37.

a constrained imagination. His remonstrance to Miller was that he would not "bow to the majority view."[43]

Yet Yoder's sexual desires seemed quite conventional: a cis-gendered white man wanting to have sexual experiences with numerous cis-gendered women. Goossen's research catalogues Yoder's kinky sexual explorations: non-ejaculative penis-in-vagina intercourse, partial vaginal penetration, voyeuristic masturbation, sexual escapades with students, sex at work, variegated acts imbued with the intoxication of spirituality. He justified his exploits as groundbreaking experimentation, requiring objectified subjects. "I am being led into a kind of theological, ethical, and psychological study for which I need your help," he announced in a letter circulated to women in the mid-1970s. "This subject is at once personal friendship, personal counseling, and theological ethics," he concluded the invitation. "Only thanks to your friendship, sisterhood, can I do the theology."[44] He thought of his erotic sprees as following along Christ's path – personal adventures in the sexual politics of Jesus, as he outlined in a 1977 essay: "the freedom which Jesus lived out with women who touched him and whose status as sexual victims was an immediate part of his ministry to them."[45] He positioned himself in the role of Jesus, ministering to women, liberating them from their sexual "fear/taboo" around physical closeness to men – all of which aimed to "defang the beast," as Yoder described his priestly activity "to confirm the safeness of closeness by demonstrating non-arousal."[46] The problem, he claimed, is that "we live in a too safe society, where no risks are taken and therefore no emotional rewards can be reached." He presented this cultural assessment as a backdrop for the significance of his "visible modeling to make clear the fruitfulness and propriety of a freer expression of affection."[47]

Mary Ellen Meyer, John Howard Yoder's sister, explained to others at the time that in her estimation "Yoder's experiment was no experiment."[48] Meyer commented in a letter to one of the women involved with Yoder: "It seems strange to me, for example, that he never included any single men in the groups." If Yoder was compelled to experiment with forms of affection as a ministry to others, Meyer observed, "Surely they [single

[43] Memo from John H. Yoder to Marlin E. Miller, October 30, 1979. Box 1, Folder 6, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. In her use of this memo, Goossen misunderstands Yoder's grievance. Yoder did not chide Miller in this section of the letter, as Goossen claims; instead, Yoder was complaining about his wife: "we were held by Anny's two basic moves: . . . the demand at the same time that I bow to the majoritarian view and that it come from the heart." See Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 34.

[44] John H. Yoder, "A Call for Aid," July-August, 1974, 1, 3. Box 1, Folder 5, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001.

[45] John H. Yoder, "Affective Resources for Singles," July 1977, 12. Box 1, Folder 4, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 24.

[46] Letter from John H. Yoder to Miller E. Miller, December 6, 1979. Box 1, Folder 6, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 12. In a handwritten "note to NH," dated August 23 (without a year), Yoder indicated that he received the language to describe sexual drives as *the beast* from his interlocutor: "If self stimulation can train me to manage my drives (you said 'tame the beast') [illegible] genital contexts or to be more adequate in married genitality, it can be legitimized, but the limit arises where other partners are fantasized." John H. Yoder, handwritten note, August 23. "Women, collected materials, 1970-1979." Box 200, Folder 75, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048. Yoder also used the verb "defang" in *Body Politics*, 9.

[47] Yoder, "Affective Resources for Singles," 13. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 26.

[48] Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 33.

men] also have needs of acceptance and self worth, and being loved for who they are."[49] Marlin Miller made the same point to Yoder in a 1979 letter: "your attempt would be more credible and less open to the critique of rationalization if you were equally concerned about intimacy between men and intimacy between women as well as between yourself and other women."[50] Yoder latched onto biblical accounts of Jesus' relationship with women but ignored passages where Jesus was in intimate closeness with other men. He chose, for example, not to take the intimacy between Jesus and the beloved male disciple in John's Gospel – "One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining on his bosom" (John 13:23, 25) – as an invitation to experiment in homoerotic bodily intimacies.

Rather than being part of the sexual avant-garde, Yoder's behavior fit within the scope of long-standing traditions of violent forms of heteronormative masculinity, his sexuality as an instance of the patriarchal desire to possess women as sexual objects, as vessels for men to work out their erotic predilections. Contrary to his own self-understanding, Yoder clearly was not among the vanguard in his use of women for sexual pleasure. He was instead a stereotypical example of the quintessential Western custom of phallic power – "throughout history women have been appropriated as sexual objects," Juliet Mitchell wrote in 1971, a significant text of Yoder's generation, "the sexual relationship can be assimilated to the statute of possession"[51] – although perhaps unique in his bellicose rationalizations and methodical pursuit of sexual exploits.

There were other options available if Yoder was interested in experiments in sexuality. Queer subcultures burgeoned and flourished around him – countercultural movements of communal sexual expression, communities reaching for alternative modes of erotic life. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, documented and theorized the queer "minoritarian lifeworlds" in the late-twentieth century, where men "took care of one another not only by offering flesh but by performing a care for the self that encompassed a vast care for others – a delicate and loving 'being for others.'"[52] Gayle S. Rubin's landmark essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," emerged in this same era. She exposed the cultural ideologies that subtend discourses of sex – in which people are acculturated to harmful relationships as part of socially acceptable moral hierarchies of power – and proposed guidance for healthy sexual relationships. "We should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of pleasure they provide," she advised.[53]

While Yoder pursued subjects with whom to explore the range of his erotic desire, queer communities developed a trajectory for sexual ethics in which noncoercive care

[49] Mary Ellen Meyer, letter to "W," February 27, 1980, 3. This letter was made available to me by Meyer, who has agreed to deposit her correspondence in the Mennonite Church USA archives in Elkhart, Indiana. Meyer exchanged letters with a woman who was involved with Yoder, although the woman's identity was kept from her.

[50] Memo from Marlin E. Miller to John H. Yoder, August 13, 1979, 11. Box 1, Folder 8, Rachel Waltner Goossen Collection on John Howard Yoder, 1973-2014, HM1-049, Mennonite Church USA Archives–Elkhart, Indiana.

[51] Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1971), 110.

[52] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 56, 51.

[53] Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol Vance (New York, NY: Routledge, 1984), 283.

for each other became essential to communal life. These queer insights took on the shape of Christian theology in Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, in which sexual ethics is inseparable from an ever-widening circle of relationships. "Whatever ways we may choose to express ourselves sexually," Heyward wrote, "we are obligated to approach each other's lives with a profound sense of tenderness, respect, and openness to learning *with* each other how we might become more faithful friends – in relation not only to each other but to the larger world as well, to helping make it a more just and peaceful resource of pleasure for all living creatures."[54] Sex is about knowing and being known, about mutual vulnerability and reciprocal power, about following the pleasures of the body into the care-filled joy of friendship – "journeying together through places of brokenness and pain toward safety and tenderness."[55] Power is an ever-present theme flowing through these queer conversations. "'Having sex,' if it is erotic," Heyward observed, "is about power-sharing."[56] Late-twentieth century discussions about sex could not escape power analyses, unless theorists decided to ignore feminist discourse and queer life.[57]

When Kathy Rudy reflected on this era, she saw "gay and radical sex communities" in which people "organized their sexual-social lives on a . . . fundamentally communal [model]," where "allegiance to the entire community is often more vital and meaningful than any particular coupling within that community."[58] The sexual life of these subcultures was awash in communitarian ethics. Intimacies were embedded within relational structures for collective care. For the erotically curious, for the sexual misfit, and for the "victims" of the hegemonic moral order – "I know what that consensus teaches," Yoder said of himself, "for I am its product and victim"[59] – options for experimentation abounded in the 1970s and 80s.[60]

Evasive Exceptionalism

Yoder kept his distance from the collective discernment occurring within queer social movements. In this sense his posture was typical of a particular stream of the Mennonite tradition – an exceptionalism invested in the reification of distinctives and therefore vigilant against the temptations of worldly acculturation. As outlined in his 1969 paper,

---

[54] Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1989), 135.

[55] Ibid., 108.

[56] Ibid.

[57] As Shulamith Firestone declared in her 1970 manifesto, which became a landmark text for second-wave feminism, "Power, however it has evolved, whatever its origin, will not be given up without a struggle." *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 30.

[58] Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), 75.

[59] See n. 42.

[60] Yoder kept extensive folders on the subject of "homosexuality" (his word). The files in his archive track the discourse of his era on LGBTQ sexualities: essays, book reviews, clippings from magazines, a spread of literature from ex-gay pamphlets to pro-LGBTQ Mennonite newsletters (see Boxes 66A, 69, 150, 186, 204, 215, 223); he was familiar with the contributions of Leo Bersani and David Halperin (Box 69, Folder 12). His earliest public reflection on the topic was for the 1978 Mennonite Medical Association's consultation in Schiller Park, Illinois. (John H. Yoder, "Is Homosexuality a Sin?" September 29-30, 1978. Box A, Folder 36, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048. An audio recording of this talk is also available: John H. Yoder, "Is Homosexuality a Sin?" Box 239, Tape 85.) He continued with this theme in a 1982 presentation: John H. Yoder, "History and Hermeneutics," March 18, 1982. (Box C, Folder 9; for an audio recording of this talk, see Box 239, Tape 86.)

"Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," North American Mennonite communities had appropriated features from the traditions of neighbors – an appropriation that resulted, Yoder argued, in the construction of a modern identity through "a series of borrowings from the surrounding Protestantism in an effort to renew the Mennonite reality," thus diluting the particular witness of their longstanding Christian tradition.[61] Yoder reproached critics who claimed that his descriptions of borrowing involved an implicit "negative value judgment."[62] Despite his protestations, however, Yoder did assume that there was such a thing as a "specifically Anabaptist type of vision"[63] and that Mennonite communities would achieve "greater integrity" if they reformed themselves "directly from Anabaptist rootage" instead of the "disjointed borrowing from contradictory sources."[64] In other words, regardless of his defensive insistence to the contrary, Yoder exhibited a bias against Mennonites who borrowed from outside the ecclesial family.

In an address to Anabaptist-related denominational leaders in 1968, Yoder blamed Mennonite communities for neglecting their own traditions while incorporating characteristics of North American life. "The linkage with social conservatism which is characteristic of many of our churches now is one of the things we have borrowed along the way from the non-radical reformation movements among which we have been living." The problems within Mennonite churches come from the outside, he claimed, therefore turning an opportunity for self-reflection into a way to scapegoat foreign influences. Yoder went on to name the problems of Mennonite communities as a result of "borrowing the patriotism of American frontier religions" and "borrowing the affluence of the American economy." In each instance, Yoder maintained, "it is an arrangement which we have taken into our churches from outside the stance of their founding fathers or their theological leanings."[65] He ignored the possibility that failures within contemporary Mennonite communities could also derive from problems internal to the Anabaptist tradition – autochthonous pathologies.

Yoder positioned himself as an exceptional representative of an exceptional ecclesial tradition. He would not acquiesce to the customs of the masses; he resisted subjecting his particularities to the routines of general discourse. Yoder benefited from the status of being an anomalous theologian of an idiosyncratic tradition, a posture in his social and professional life which allowed him to devise the social conditions of his laboratory for sexual experimentation. Open collaboration within networks of mutual accountability – as embodied in queer, minoritarian collectives – did not appeal to him. He would rather engage in erotic practices unencumbered, on his own terms, without being subjected to the reasoning of family, friends, colleagues, and peers. For instance, Marlin

---

[61] John H. Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: The Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 7.

[62] Ibid., 16, 40-41.

[63] Ibid., 37. In his dissertation, Yoder sought to set the parameters for what counted as Anabaptism. The "Anabaptists who stood on the foundations of Zürich and Schleitheim," he concluded, "deserve to be considered the 'true Anabaptists' and deserve to be heard in an age in which the topic of discussion is, once again, the church community, its visibility, and its viability." John H. Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder, trans. David Carl Stassen and C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004), 136.

[64] Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," 30.

[65] John H. Yoder, "The Unique Role of the Historic Peace Churches," *Brethren Life and Thought* 14 (Summer 1969): 86.

Miller reproached Yoder in a private letter: "the criteria you have articulated for both the more general acting out and the most controversial 'experiment' (Strasbourg and to a significantly lesser degree AMBS during the last year) have consistently circumvented real communal dimensions as well as the social reality of your own marriage."[66]

Yoder disregarded counsel, evaded commitments, and avoided homoerotic communities of mutual care. He did not experiment with forms of sexuality on the cutting edge – liberated from "an entire cultural mindset," freed from "the consensus of our respectable culture," loosed from "the majority view" – as he had described his heterosexual eroticism to Marlin Miller.[67] Instead, Yoder was grasping at a theological defense of his desire to operate as a master within his own sexual domain, a world under his control, which is the nature of patriarchal power: that is, the exercise of masculine, heteronormative desire freed from responsibility, from liabilities, from answerability to members of a community; the ability to objectify, to possess, to use others for one's own purposes.

In their back-and-forth correspondence, Marlin Miller declared such criticisms to Yoder. "You have thus made yourself in fact legislator, judge, and pope in your own case and in areas where the church's discernment of your gifts, your professional expertise, and experience have least prepared you." Miller continued, "you are caught in a web of self-rationalization."[68] Miller reprimanded Yoder for his "concentration on acting out your ideas in the context of private twosomes rather than giving at least equal energy and creativity to developing and/or strengthening appropriate community structures."[69] Yoder did not engage the conversations about, and experiments in, radical sexual politics happening around him, where people were collectively discerning arrangements for mutual pleasure and intimate care as part of the formation of egalitarian communities liberated from the oppressive power structures of a society organized for the benefit of heterosexual men. Instead he spent his theological energy on his own obsessive desires, incorporating women into his sexual fiefdom, with himself as the avant-garde theologian, himself as judge and jury for moral discernment.

In the defense he provided Miller, Yoder claimed a kind of scientific objectivity – that his sexual escapades adhered to a kind of "experimental method."[70] He likened his activity to medical research in which women bore the risk of his tests: "Only by the surgeon's risking some failures, can it be determined for which kinds of patients heart surgery or organ transplant is a risk worth running – and even some of the 'good risks' will not be healed. That is a ground not for rejecting surgery but for refining it."[71] He was the doctor; the women were his laboratory research subjects. He located himself in a detached position in relation to them, the distance ascribed to someone with power over others. If people were hurt along the way, the knowledge gained would, presumably, be worth the risk. The benefits outweighed the costs. Yoder had calculated the

[66] Memo from Miller to Yoder, August 13, 1979, 10. I have not found archival material that explains the nature of Yoder's "Strasbourg experiment" early in his career.

[67] See n. 41 and n. 42.

[68] Memo from Miller to Yoder, August 13, 1979, 10. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 37, although in her quotation Goossen excises a phrase from the passage without explanation.

[69] Memo from Miller to Yoder, August 13, 1979, 9. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 36.

[70] John H. Yoder, handwritten letter, 1980, 5. Box 1, Folder 7, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 37.

[71] Ibid.

risks and made peace with the collateral harm. According to the logic of his crass utilitarianism, the ends would justify his means.

Protocols Redacted

While Yoder exempted his own behavior from scrutiny, he developed and refined a communitarian theology that allowed him to require others to be subjected to his reasoning. On the basis of his own exegesis of the procedures related to binding and loosing outlined in Matthew 18, he demanded an audience with the women who had reported their experiences of his abuse. That should be the starting point, Yoder argued, for the accountability group Miller convened to address the allegations. "In terms of the reconciliation mandate of Matt. 18, we cannot proceed in the absence of accusers."[72] In order for their testimonies to matter in a biblically faithful disciplinary process, Yoder maintained, the women would have to be subjected to his presence, his voice, his rationality. He thus interpreted abusive misconduct as a type of disagreement about ethics. Yoder sought to impose his protocols regarding discernment about morals onto a situation of personal violation, where one person harms another. And, by a sleight of hand, he led people to believe that Matthew 18 was the obvious locus for biblically informed conflict-resolution, despite other relevant scriptures.

Yoder was not unaware of the breadth of biblical passages available for guidance in addressing a situation where one member wrongs another. For example, he mentioned – in passing, while centering his readers' attention on Matthew 18 – the apostle Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 5 to take seriously the "moral solidarity linking all the members of the body," which, for Yoder, meant that "I should deal with my brother's sin because he and I are members one of another." Consequently, the guilt of the disobedient party is "a kind of collective blame shared by the whole body."[73] However, Yoder prioritized his interpretive framework of Matthew 18 as a way of evading Paul's pointed instruction.[74] Yoder converted the severity of Paul's instruction regarding excommunication into the demand to seek reconciliation with the disobedient member above other concerns: "unless I am the agent of his sharing in restoration, he is the agent of my sharing guilt."[75] Yoder distracted his community of readers from the primary concern of 1 Corinthians 5: that is, "Drive out the wicked person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13). Yoder did not provide a rationale for why he prioritized one authoritative part of the Bible over another authoritative part of the Bible. For Christians who favored the Gospels over Pauline letters, for Mennonites who had a distaste for excommunication due to historic intra-Anabaptist debates about the ban, and for people who had not

[72] Letter from John Howard Yoder to Marlin E. Miller, Evelyn Shellenberger, Millard Lind, and Marcus Smucker, December 8, 1983. Box 1, Folder 10, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, 1972-1996, X-18-001. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 41-42.

[73] Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 14.

[74] In a 1982 sermon Yoder misread the guidance of 1 Corinthians 5-6 as reinforcing his "binding and loosing" program to adjudicate moral disputes. "Its [i.e., Matthew 18] weight is accented by the account of Paul's asking the Christians in Corinth to use this procedure instead of going to the Gentile courts." While in 1 Cor. 6 Paul does ask members of the church to avoid the Gentile courts, Paul does not mention in 1 Cor. 5-6 (or elsewhere) anything like the interpersonal process outlined in Matthew 18. Yoder misled his audience by claiming that "this procedure" – which refers to his "binding and loosing" reading of Matthew 18 – is present in 1 Corinthians. John H. Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 122.

[75] Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 14.

experienced their lives as threatened by the violence of others, Yoder's exclusive focus on these words from Jesus did not require an explanation.

The ethical apparatus Yoder erected atop his exegesis of Matthew 18 was self-serving. He made universal a process of moral discernment in order to protect his interpretive authority as he defended himself from admonition. Just as he decided that "the Corinthian type of church life" (i.e., an egalitarian order of worship where everyone is enabled to speak) outlined in 1 Corinthians 12-14 was not "normative in any formal way," the same should have been said about Matthew 18.[76] The apostle Paul's command to throw out the offender who endangers others – "to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5) – is as normative for disciplinary action as Yoder's reading of Matthew 18.[77] There is biblical authorization for adjudicative processes to rule against a member of the church body without forcing the victimized to engage with the victimizer. However, Yoder's insistence on his own exegetical formulation of binding and loosing as the biblically authorized process for ethical regulation produced a fundamentalism regarding the orthodox mode of discipline. According to Yoder, the witness of his accusers should not be admissible for discernment about his status in the community because the women refused to be subjected to the trauma of his presence, as he claimed his process demanded.[78] Thus he constructed a theological shield from accusations of sexual misconduct.

As he revised his binding and loosing argument for *Body Politics*, Yoder mused in a note to himself that discussions about power relations had become more prominent in the 1990s than they were in the 1960s when he had first published his reflections on Matthew 18. He recognized that

> The initial imperative, "Go to your brother or sister, between the two of you" may now be seen to be unrealistic. It seems to presuppose that the brothers and sisters are equals, so that anyone who is aware of an offense is empowered to admonish, and anyone who needs admonition is committed, by virtue of the baptismal covenant, to be addressable. But if the offense itself involved an abuse of power, how can one expect the victim to have the courage to address the perpetrator? Does such a requirement not merely reinforce the offender's control of a skewed relationship?

Yoder answered his own question by stating that the biblical passage did not require such an encounter in order to begin the process. "It is not the case that to respect Jesus' words would obligate the victim to make herself vulnerable to being overpowered again by the offender." He claimed that this provision was already included in his first articulation of the argument. "As was already spelled out in the original version of the above text, it is a

[76] Ibid., 19.

[77] From the beginning of Yoder's use of Matthew 18, he was aware of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, as evidenced in his lecture at AMBS on February 4, 1965: "1 Cor 5 & 6: Reason for discipline: all of you are part of the same lump of bread; his presence will pollute you; you deal with it because it is a part of you. –It is a pastoral responsibility because we are part of a covenant body." John H. Yoder, "Issues in Ecclesiology: Class Notes," 1966, 9. Box A, Folder 22, John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048.

[78] Melanie May comments on the susceptibility of Matthew 18 to abusive manipulation: "Here a *stated* assumption is that if the offending brother or sister hears the offender's plaint, there is no need for public confession before the whole community. Many of us have heard too many stories about offenders and abusers who take advantage of such privacy to perpetuate their offensive, abusive patterns." Melanie A. May, "The Pleasure of Our Lives as Text: A New Rule of Christ for Anabaptist Women," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 36.

mistake to think that the first purpose of admonition is to meet the victim's need to purge her pain or resentment."[79] Church discipline, according to Yoder, is set up for the reconciliation of the offender, not the concerns of the victim, therefore the needs of the person who suffers the harm are dismissed as irrelevant.

Furthermore, as Yoder indicated in his earliest account in *Gospel Herald*, anyone who hears about the offense is obligated to confront the offender, thus his preference for New Testament translations which lack "against you" and instead render Matthew 18:15 as follows: "If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." The sin does not have to be personal – i.e., "against you" – for an individual to become involved in the process of mutual admonition. The victim should not be alone in having to confront the offender because such an offense is a communal violation, a sin extending throughout the social body. In other words, members of the community are empowered by the process outlined in Matthew 18 to admonish the offender, regardless of whether they have suffered direct harm. Their solidarity with the member who had experienced the primary violation would be enough to necessitate a confrontation with the offender because sin affects the whole body. "There is an unlimited responsibility on the part of every Christian to contribute in a reconciling way wherever there has been sin or unintentional offense or misunderstanding."[80] Yoder repeated this same reading of the passage in his contribution to the 1967 *Concern* pamphlet; he clarified and intensified the shared responsibility: "It is thus the responsibility of every person – of the offender, of the offended, of every informed third party in the Christian fellowship – when aware of any kind of offense, to take initiative toward the restoration of fellowship." Yoder made this imperative the heading of the section in which he emphasized the agency of each member of a community to confront the offender: "*Everyone in the church shares the responsibility for the reconciling approach*."[81]

This emphasis receded from view in his published position as Yoder resisted Miller's disciplinary process. Yoder weakened the earlier imperative for communal responsibility when he revisited the argument for publication. "If I am not the one sinned against, this fact may make it more difficult for me to recognize my responsibility to intervene," he wrote in *Body Politics*. "The person offended is not excused from the responsibility to reconcile; yet neither is anyone else who knows about it."[82] This was the only mention of communal responsibility in his revised presentation of church discipline. He no longer highlighted the imperative of all members to confront the offender. Instead, in this latter version, as he faced censure for his behavior, Yoder centered the procedures for ethical deliberation on the restoration of the offender as part of the reassessment of the moral order. In the new text, reconciliation was his overwhelming concern. "Conversation

[79] John H. Yoder, "Cavils and Caveats: Retrospect on Binding & Loosing," undated. Box 192, Folder "B + L detailed notes from past discussions," John Howard Yoder Papers, 1944-2013, HM1-048.

[80] John H. Yoder, "Church Discipline," *Gospel Herald*, 709.

[81] Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 11-12. Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran make this same observation. "Yoder made the argument that this process required his accusers to come face to face with him, a gloss on how to read Matthew 18 that he explicitly rejected in some of his writings." See their "Scandalizing John Howard Yoder." Yoder rejected the requirement for an accuser to meet with the accused in his early writings. He dropped this part of his argument in his latter writings as he fought against Miller's disciplinary process. In other words, with regard to the use of Matthew 18 in his reflections on church discipline, my argument in this section is that Yoder refined over time a theology that was consistent with his behavior.

[82] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 4.

with reconciling intent is the most powerful way for a community to discover when the rules they have been applying are inadequate, so that they may be modified."[83]

As Yoder adjusted his argument, he returned to his preference for Bible translations that include "against you," but this time his point had nothing to do with an emphasis on shared responsibility. Instead, in *Body Politics* his aim was to preclude any exegesis of Matthew 18 that would turn the focus to the violated person, which, he argued, "misdirects attention away from concern for the restoration of the offender and toward the feelings of the offended one."[84] During his disciplinary process, in accordance with his revised argument, Yoder centered on his own needs as the excluded one whom the community was obligated to restore to fellowship. The "feelings" of the offended parties were a distraction, he stated in print, and insisted to Miller that the women whom he had allegedly abused meet with him to begin the process. While he had admitted in his memo to himself that Matthew 18 did not require a face-to-face encounter with them – as he had made explicit in 1967, a text which established that anyone who had heard accounts of the violations would be authorized to reprove Yoder as part of initiating the protocols for mutual admonition – he dropped such statements in the publication of *Body Politics*. Similarly, in a document about disciplinary procedures and punishment which he posted online in 1995, Yoder now claimed that "Matthew 18:15 instructs the accuser to speak first privately to 'the brother.'"[85] The theological reflections he offered to readers seem to be justifications of his own obstinacy as his community attempted to hold him accountable.

In summary, while he was rewriting his argument for *Body Politics*, Yoder recognized in his private notes that the harmed person did not have to face the perpetrator: "It is not the case that to respect Jesus' words would obligate the victim to make herself vulnerable to being overpowered again by the offender." However, Yoder set this point aside when he re-published his argument in *Body Politics*. He chose to soften to a murmur what was his clear instruction in the earlier publication. He obscured what he had previously acknowledged about power dynamics, concealing that truth in the text's shadows, an act of theological production that mimicked his personal strategy against his victims and the people who called him to account for his abusive behavior.[86]

---

[83] Ibid., 6.

[84] Ibid., 4.

[85] John Howard Yoder, *The End of Sacrifice: The Capital Punishment Writings of John Howard Yoder*, ed. John C. Nugent (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 204. In their "Scandalizing John Howard Yoder," Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran make the connection to this late essay by Yoder, although they quote a line from his list of priorities according to the "civil justice system" instead of his list of characteristics for what he outlined as the New Testament tradition of due process (see their footnote 24).

[86] Kimberly Penner observes that Yoder "neglects how power operates within gendered and sexualized relationships, particularly in the community of faith, to subordinate, control, marginalize, and oppress – and to fail to form relationships of shared power." Kimberly L. Penner, "Mennonite Peace Theology and Violence against Women," *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 283-84. Similarly, Elizabeth Phillips concludes her chapter on "Anabaptist Political Theologies" with an account of Yoder's "persistent and disturbing patterns of domination, manipulation, and violence" (343), which signals a connection between his social ethics and his sexual ethics. Yoder's legacy, Phillips continues, involves the question of "whether and how we all attend to power. Along with Anabaptist discernment of the call to renounce dominant uses of power must come the discernment not shown by Yoder and many of those who surrounded him to critically analyze actual assertions of power from the highest level of politics all the way down to the most mundane interactions of everyday life" (344). See Elizabeth Philips, "Anabaptist Political Theologies," chapter 24 in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, second edition, edited by William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

Women Disbelieved

The force of Yoder's model for church discipline, which he had crafted and refined over a lifetime, was found convincing because of his stature in Mennonite communities – a masculinist position of theological power which he reinforced with an ecclesiological vision that subordinated the authority of charismatic and prophetic roles, spiritual positions that historically have been feminized.[87]

He claimed in *Body Politics* that the apostle Paul offered "very serious qualifications" when he described "spirit-driven" gifts: "One of those is rational, edifying communication, which he calls 'prophecy'"[88] – not irrational, not deconstructive, not unruly, but logical, moderated, and restrained. In his "Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," where Yoder laid out the inner-workings of his communal ecclesiology, he tightened the constraints on the proper characteristics of the prophetic role in a community. "Prophecy," he wrote, "is neither prediction nor moral guidance, yet it states and reenforces [*sic*] a vision of the place of the believing community in history."[89] A prophetic gift offers nothing new; rather, it is a mode of communication that affirms a vision already known – a "disciplined human discourse" of which "verifiability is objective, formal," and not "associated with the erratic, impatient, unpredictable."[90] Squelching disruptive possibilities, Yoder routinized the prophetic charism. The Spirit's work through charismatic outpouring happens according to a discernible pattern. "Some prophets and prophetesses are furthermore recognized in the New Testament as regularly exercizing [*sic*] that 'office.'"[91] The prophet operates as a known and respectable instrument of God. Not every prophet is considered equal, not every charismatic should be trusted. Yoder cultivated suspicion regarding the words of prophets, skepticism toward the insights of charismatic members of the community – people who, in historic Anabaptism, have been women.

Yoder's version of a radical Protestant "free church" took cues from sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists who coalesced around *The Schleitheim Confession*, a document that consolidated their theological vision for the movement's future, an agreement which recent historical scholarship has argued functioned to constrain Spirit-empowered women. Despite the active role of women early in the movement, the Swiss confession wrote them out of leadership positions. "Anabaptism was carried forward primarily by the activity of charismatic women," notes C. Arnold Snyder. "Such 'spirit-anointed' Swiss Anabaptist women as Margret Hottinger, Winbrat Fanwiler, Magdalena Muller, Barbara Murglen, and Frena Buman did not wait to be appointed prophets by a church community or a male authority: they had been called directly by God, and they acted

[87] Jaime Pitts borrows the concept of "symbolic capital" from Pierre Bourdieu to frame how "Yoder was authorized by the church to be a radical Christian intellectual, and he used that authorization for over two decades to legitimate his violent sexual politics." Jaime Pitts, "Anabaptist Re-Vision: On John Howard Yoder's Misrecognized Sexual Politics," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 162.

[88] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 50.

[89] Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 29.

[90] Ibid., 29-30.

[91] Ibid., 30.

with freedom as a result."[92] Given the involvement of such women in the Swiss Anabaptist communities in the 1520s, Snyder argues that *Schleitheim*'s use of masculine language for church leadership intentionally divested women of authority:

> The Schleitheim Articles of 1527 mark a turning point in Swiss Anabaptism . . . Among other things, the Schleitheim Articles now prescribed how leadership among the Swiss congregations was to be structured: the "shepherd" of the church, chosen by the congregation, must be a morally upright person (1 Timothy 3:7); the shepherd will preside in the congregation in reading, exhortation, teaching, warning, admonishing; in prayer and the Lord's Supper. There was no thought of electing a woman to such a position; neither is there any mention of prophecy or a place given to pneumatic expression.[93]

Schleitheim involved an intervention against the influence of women. This Swiss version of Anabaptism developed an allergy to spiritual gifts associated with women. As Johannes Kessler commented with disdain regarding his Anabaptist neighbors, "There arose wild and arrogant error through the women of the Anabaptists."[94]

The tradition preserved in the *Schleitheim Confession* delivered an institutional form that diminished the authority of women. In his dissertation Yoder characterized these prophets and charismatics as extremists who could have misguided the Anabaptist movement, if the *Schleitheim Confession* "had not achieved a viable form that was capable of withstanding the intemperance of fanaticism."[95] This particular Anabaptist trajectory cultivated reservations about roles in the community that have been historically gendered as feminine. Yoder typified this tradition. Each gift was not given the same value in his construal of a congregational meeting. His schema singled out charismatics and prophets – ecclesial roles associated with women – as requiring provisos, caveats, stipulations. They must satisfy a list of Yoder's conditions in order for their voice to be registered. "Holy Spirit guidance is not an alternative to correct information."[96]

Mennonite institutions were predisposed to depend on Yoder to set the terms of the conversation, including his persistent efforts to referee and undermine the testimony of women. He developed his theology within a religious world where women's concerns

---

[92] C. Arnold Snyder, "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80, no. 4 (October 2006): 591. Cf. C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1995), 255-58.

[93] Snyder, "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism," 594. Cf. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 258: "Although the movement from pneumatic enthusiasm to the congregational election of male leaders took place among the Swiss in only two years (1525-1527), the same general pattern would be repeated over a longer span of time elsewhere in the Anabaptist movement, for the same basic reason: direct spiritual revelations and pneumatic manifestations came under suspicion, and were replaced by revelation of written Scripture, interpreted by a male leadership."

[94] Johannes Kessler, *Sabbata*, quoted in Snyder, "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism," 592.

[95] John H. Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*, 71.

[96] Yoder, "Binding and loosing," 19.

were frequently absorbed by silence, disbelieved when heard.[97] Historical trajectories of patriarchal Anabaptism played out in Yoder's formulations of communal discernment as he orchestrated the deliberations about his behavior – Anabaptist traditions in which men consolidated their power by positioning their leadership as stable and responsible over against the charismatic and prophetic women who were viewed as saboteurs, as undermining the Radical Reformation movement.

Conclusion

Yoder constructed, reinforced, and inhabited a structure for moral discernment that stifled the voices of people who threatened to disrupt his abusive experimentation. He used his ecclesiological ethics to demand that victims be forced into his presence, where their words would be subjected to his justifications, where they would have had to fend off his attempts to overpower the truth of their experiences with his explanations just as he had overpowered them before with his body. "We do not feel that invoking Matthew 18 as a model for process is appropriate in this case," wrote the group of women – including survivors of his abuse and their advocates – in 1992 to the JHY Task Force, a committee with ecclesial authority to discipline Yoder. "A number of us are frightened by John and at this point do not want an ongoing relationship with him."[98] The committee trusted the women's accounts and did not require a meeting with Yoder, despite his demands for dialogue. The JHY Task Force issued a formal memorandum to Yoder, charging him with thirteen counts of sexual misconduct: "These charges indicate a long pattern of inappropriate sexual behavior between you and a number of women. The settings for this conduct were in many places: conferences, classrooms, retreats, homes, apartments, offices, parking lots . . . We believe the stories we have heard."[99]

Upon the findings of the committee, the regional Mennonite judicatory suspended Yoder's ministerial credentials and stipulated that he participate in an accountability process, which would determine appropriate restitution for the harm he caused. He resisted these measures, as Stanley Hauerwas recounts in his memoir. "He did not think

[97] Not only was Yoder a product of a particular religious trajectory, he was emblematic of a dominant characteristic of the Western tradition, as Mary Beard highlights in Greco-Roman sources: "When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice." See Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2017), xi. To address Yoder's legacy, therefore, involves an ongoing commitment to systemic change in patriarchal structures of power. "To treat Yoder's wrongs more systematically we need to acknowledge that his actions are underwritten by a culture – and academic, ecclesial, and other institutional practices and structures – that often demean women." Guth, "Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder," 129. In another essay Guth uses the discourse of moral injury from military ethics to note that "applying the concept [of moral injury] to Yoder's work reveals the structural, cultural, and institutional scope of the problem, drawing attention to a culture that allows for violence against women and highlighting widespread relevance of the problem." Karen V. Guth, "Moral Injury, Feminist and Womanist Ethics, and Tainted Legacies," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 173. In another publication Guth restates her suggestion for the context of the academy: "teaching Yoder's tainted legacy invites professors and students to address the structural, cultural, and institutional scope of the problem, drawing attention to a culture which allows for violence against women and highlighting the widespread relevance of the problem." See Karen V. Guth, "Moral Injury and the Ethics of Teaching Tainted Legacies," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 21, no. 3 (July 2018): 206.

[98] Anonymous, "Confidential Statement," 4. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 56.

[99] Atlee Beechy, Willis Breckbill, James Lapp, Mary Mishler, Dale Schumm, Phyllis Stutzman, Ruth Yoder, and Harold Yoder, "Charges of Sexual Misconduct," March 14, 1992, 1. Prairie Street Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Ind.) Task Force Records, 1992. Box 1, Folder 6, Rachel Waltner Goossen Collection on John Howard Yoder, 1973-2014, HM1-049. Cf. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast," 57.

the process was following the rule that he should be allowed to confront his accusers." Stanley Hauerwas, James McClendon, and Glen Stassen – three theologians whom Yoder respected – argued with him, explaining why he should cooperate with the disciplinary committee. As Hauerwas narrates the events, "Glen arranged for the three of us to have a conference call with John just prior to the time he had to make a decision about submitting to the discernment committee . . . John agreed to submit."[100] This cohort of academics persuaded Yoder to submit himself to a process outside of his control; three men compelled him to accept the church's discipline and accountability procedures. His victims did not convince him. He did not respect their requested processes. His disregard for these women's voices coincided with the sexist inclinations of his theological production, an apparatus befitting his abuse.

In her book *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite has argued that there is a globalized "war on women" in which "the battlefield is everywhere and the threat can be nearly constant."[101] The threat of violence conditions women's everyday lives. It is pervasive and it is constant. Christian traditions have funded this war with patriarchal theologies and institutions. Yoder was a collaborator, despite his writings on nonviolence.[102] As I have demonstrated, his theology of moral discernment became a suitable structure for the perpetuation of his sexual violations.

"Sexism is not, in fact, insignificant when it comes to transforming social structures away from the deforming effects of a militarization of society through nonviolence," Thistlethwaite argues. "It is at its heart."[103] In other words, a commitment to anti-sex-

[100] Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 244-45. Glen Stassen offers a slightly different version of the story: "My memory is that John was already meeting with the committee; we did not need to persuade him to do that. Yet the meetings were very hard psychologically for John, and also for the committee. What we did – and I kept doing – was to encourage him to stay with the process, because we all needed him to work this through, to repent and change, and to be restored to standing as a writer and teacher, which of course did happen." Glen Stassen, "Glen Stassen's reflections on the Yoder case," *Thinking Pacifism* [blog], September 24, 2013, https://thinkingpacifism.net/2013/09/24/glen-stassens-reflections-on-the-yoder-case/.)

[101] Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, 44 (cf. 127). Similarly, Carol Penner observes that in a field of study where men have set the terms for the discourse, peace theology has tended to relegate sexual abuse to the periphery: "As women begin to break the silence which surrounds abuse, they will begin to name the significance of their own suffering. For example, in the case of sexual assault, Marie Fortune suggests that this type of violation makes clear the totality of the violation of the person: 'Being forced sexually against one's will is the ultimate experience of powerlessness, short of death.' This is in marked contrast to the way male theologians have sometimes minimized sexual assault (on the rare occasion that they do mention it). For example, John Howard Yoder in his discussion of assault in his book *What Would You Do?*, brackets the question of 'sexual menace' as an irrelevant emotional element which clouds a rational discussion of assault." See Carol Penner, "Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence Against Women," in *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, Occasional Papers no. 16, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 106. Therefore, as Mary Anne Hildebrand proposes, "We need to take another look at peace theology from the perspective of those suffering from violence in intimate relationships." See Mary Anne Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 74.

[102] While I characterize Yoder as a collaborator in a struggle which Thistlethwaite names as a theological "war against women," Guth considers the opportunities Yoder's corpus offers for tactical alliances with ethicists who would typically neglect feminist concerns. She calls for a restorative justice approach to Yoder's legacy in order to enable "the development of a feminist pacifist politics." See Guth, "Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder," 131. See also footnote 8 above for Krehbiel and Scarsella's caution regarding Guth's strategy.

[103] Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, 149.

ism is internal to peace theology.[104] I offer my critical engagement with Yoder as an invitation to reconsider further aspects of his corpus which have been assimilated into our thinking without attending to the influence of his insidious violences. There is no peace without a confrontation with the sexism internal to the theologies of nonviolence that have dominated the discourse of ethics. Peace theology, after Yoder, should involve conscientious objection to patriarchy.[105]

[104] Jaime Pitts notes that Mennonite feminists have made this same point: "as many feminists have pointed out, the entwinement of patriarchy with other dominant social forms – such as the nation-state, militarism, and Christendom – means that gender analysis must be brought to bear on those other forms." See Jaime Pitts, "On John Howard Yoder's Misrecognized Sexual Politics," 159; see his footnote 18 for the Mennonite feminist theologians to whom he refers.

[105] As Mary Anne Hildebrand writes, "Who will be the new conscientious objectors? Patriarchal theology needs to be challenged." See Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology," 79.

I am grateful to the following people for reading early drafts of this essay and providing constructive disagreements and suggestions: David Cramer, Peter Dula, Matt Elia, Ashleigh Elser, Melissa Florer-Bixler, Stanley Hauerwas, Chris Huebner, Dave Nickel, Jaime Pitts, and Alex Sider.