**Theologian's future faces a "litmus test": Yoder's response to allegations could determine standing in field**

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ELKHART – How theologian John Howard Yoder responds to the Mennonite Church's suspension of his ministerial credentials over sexual-misconduct allegations could become a "litmus test" for how history judges his work.

The action by a regional church commission against Yoder, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame, came June 27 after allegations were brought forward by eight women in positions of national church leadership.

The women said the allegations range from overt sexual language to forcible sexual behavior and took place primarily in the 1970s through mid-1980s when Yoder was President and a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary here.

Even though his ministerial status in the church remains in question, Yoder, even his critics acknowledge, deserves a prominent place in 20th-century American theology. The debate centers on just how significant that place will be.

"He's possibly the most creative and original Christian theologian at work in America today," said James William McClendon, distinguished scholar-in-residence at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "We may have to go 100 years, 200 years down the road (to learn) whether that 'possibly' is 'actually.'"

"I think he should be recognized as one of the dozen great theologians of this century (internationally)," said Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Yet a critic sees Yoder's influence as limited to "the left wing of the Reformation, which includes the Mennonite tradition and a penumbra around that.

“By and large, his views don’t shape mainline Protestant thinking. They impact it. They cause us to think twice,” said Gabriel Fackre, Abbot professor of Christian theology at the mainline Andover Newton Theological School in Union Center, Mass. “There are around the world in Europe, Asia and Africa people of far greater stature and influence than John Howard Yoder.”

Just as there is disagreement on the extent of Yoder’s theological impact, theologians disagree on the impact on his theological contributions of the action by the Church Life Commission of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.

“Of course it’s going to hurt,” said Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC, noting that Yoder would not want to separate his actions from what he has taught. “Many people are just waiting to find an excuse not to have to take him seriously.”

Yet Fackre is “of two minds” on whether the decision will impact Yoder’s work. “Even people whose character is morally dubious can be instruments of God’s purposes. Whatever is good and true in Yoder’s teaching is not going to be disqualified by his moral failures and shouldn’t be,” he said. “On the other hand, you can’t separate personal from theological issues.”

Citing the ongoing debate between views of the church as the community of saints or haven of sinners, Fackre said the “perfectionist ethics” represented by Yoder are not sufficiently self-critical about moral or spiritual life.

McClendon, a Baptist, said Yoder’s historical work “is not going to be lost to sight because of these sad events.

“There’s a way in which man and work merge together in our minds, especially in theology,” he said. “How John Yoder is viewed as a human being…depends upon the blessed and obedient-to-God outcome of the whole process.”

Yoder represents the major challenge of Christian pacifism to proponents of the Just War tradition, represented by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971); who urged Christians to consider the political consequences of their actions.

"(Yoder) is one of the figures that students would have to read if they're studying to work in theology or Christian social ethics," said Brooks Holifield, Candler professor of American church history at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Holifield is writing the first history of American theology, due out by the year 2000.

"If you wanted to pick two people for debating the morally legitimate use of deadly force…the two people you'd probably pick are Reinhold Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder," said Larry Rasmussen, the Reinhold Niebuhr professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. "I would call him (Yoder) the most sophisticated and most articulate apologist for Christian pacifism."

Yet the church action, according to Rasmussen, "casts a pall" over Yoder's contributions to ethics, theology and pacifism.

"Much of what John's contribution has been and is stands on its own terms. At the same time, this is a case where what he's involved in personally is very intimately tied to what he advocates as a professional and in his writings. There is a credibility issue," said Rasmussen, a Lutheran. "To me, the test for John Yoder is the degree to which he himself places himself into the very process of accountability that he advocates in his writing."

Rasmussen said such action would include Yoder's seeking forgiveness for any wrong from both the women and God.

"This becomes a kind of litmus test for what he has been advocating, namely the church as the community of moral accountability, which then both forms its members and holds them as a community of disciples to accountability when they—as we all do—transgress the morality of the community," Rasmussen said.

Yoder, a 1947 Goshen College graduate, did his doctoral work in historical theology from 1950 to 1957 at the University of Basel in Switzerland He was a pupil of Karl Barth, the famous Swiss-Reformed theologian who was the main force behind the 1934 Barmen Declaration, which criticized the German Christians' support for the Nazi regime.

"As Barth was to the German Christians in terms of challenging them about their loyalty to Hitler, so John has been to American Christians (in challenging their loyalty to the state)," said Hauerwas, a Methodist who became a pacifist because of Yoder's work.

Following World War II, Niebuhr's '"Christian realism" had discredited pacifism among theologians. Yoder's definition of non-violence as centered in the person and work of Christ and the messianic community "decisively turned the tide" for Christian pacifists, said Hauerwas, a former chairman of Notre Dame's theology department.

Yet Yoder's interpretation of Christianity "has never been a majority view in the church," said Fackre, a member of the United Church of Christ. "[Yoder's] influence was never as wide as the devotees of Yoder and Hauerwas would like to believe.

"What he does is predictable," he said.

"Too often potential readers believe they can dispose of Yoder without even having read him, because they 'know' in what ways Mennonites are wrong-headed about non-violence. But Yoder cannot be dismissed so easily," Hauerwas said. "John's work needs to be put squarely in the center of the Christian mainstream."

Yet despite questions of whether Yoder will conform to the long-term discipline process of his church, Rasmussen notes that there are larger issues involved.

"My larger question here is why male clergy, male theologians and male ethicists have had such an apparently difficult time abiding by the sexual norms that they themselves advocate," Rasmussen said. "It may reveal a deeper problem in the church, as well as John Yoder's own personal problems."

**SIDEBAR**

**Theologian's work is highly regarded**

ELKHART – Despite the ongoing church discipline process involving him, theologian John Howard Yoder's name already will go into the theological history books for his accomplishments.

Although there is disagreement over the significance of his work beyond his Mennonite tradition, there are several points of agreement about Yoder's impact:

• Magnum opus, "The Politics of Jesus," which "will go down as one of the great books of the 20th century in theology," said Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC.

• Reputation as "probably the best-known theologian coming out of the Mennonite world over the past two centuries," according to Hauerwas, a former chairman of Notre Dame's theology department. "There are two things most people know about Mennonites: There's the Amish billboard, and the other billboard is Yoder," said James William MeClendon, distinguished scholar in-residence at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "He's tended to put the Mennonite community on the map in a way that ethnic Mennonitism doesn't."

• Support for a biblical foundation for social ethics, which often tends to he abstract. "He has shown the inadequacy of that," said Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "He has paved the way into strong, biblical research to ground our Christian ethics."

• "Rather significant impact on the church ecumenical," said Larry Rasmussen, the Reinhold Niebuhr professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Yoder represented Mennonites in discussions organized by the National Council of Churches and at World Council of Churches assemblies.

Yoder, 64, directed the Mennonite Central Committee's relief office from 1949 to 1954 in France, where in July 1952 he married his wife, Anne. He moved to Elkhart to teach seminary classes in 1958-59 before becoming administrative assistant for overseas missions for the Elkhart-based Mennonite Board of Missions. In 1965 he became a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary in Elkhart and director of its Institute of Mennonite Studies.

While at the seminary, he assembled an extensive collection of writings and also taught at several other institutions. In 1970, he was named president.

In 1973 as laudatory reviews came out for "The Politics of Jesus,'" Yoder stepped down from his seminary posts. He also was ordained a minister that year by the Ohio District Conference of the Mennonite Church, although he never has served in a pastoral role.

After joining the Notre Dame faculty in 1977 on a part-time basis and full-time when he left AMES in 1984, Yoder served in 1988 as president of the Society of Christian Ethics, a scholarly organization.