Revisiting the Legacy of John Howard Yoder

July 25, 2013

Time has its way. As does the Spirit.

The accelerating interest in and widespread appreciation for John Howard Yoder's theological work has also provoked renewed calls for the Mennonite church, including AMBS, to revisit unfinished business with his legacy. Last year, in February and March of 2012, AMBS faculty did significant work to review AMBS's history with John Howard Yoder and to come to a shared agreement that guides how we teach, critique, interpret, and use Yoder's work with integrity, recognizing the significance of his theological work and the harmfulness of his actions. This Faculty Statement is posted on the AMBS website.

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In addition to the hard work our AMBS faculty has done to interpret the complicated ironies of John Howard Yoder's legacy over many years, I wanted to add a personal word.

As the current president of AMBS, I'm committed to a new transparency in the truth telling that must happen. We must strive to get the facts straight, to acknowledge healing work that has been done, and to shoulder the urgent healing work that must still be done. Some who are only tuning in now will say, I had no idea about John Howard Yoder's widespread sexual harassment and abuse. Others will say, why keep bringing this up; it was settled long ago; he submitted to a church disciplinary process and was cleared for ongoing ministry. Others will say, FINALLY. This has taken far too long.

The renewed outcry for truth-telling about what really happened and what didn't happen in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s has deepened my resolve and the resolve of Mennonite Church USA leaders, including Ervin Stutzman, to continue the healing journey. I was not close to the John Howard Yoder saga when it was unfolding and only heard him speak once during his visit in 1997 to Harrisonburg, VA. Now, as I review the written materials about him and talk to people, I am dumbfounded (appalled) at how long it took for anyone in authority to publicly denounce his harmful behavior.

I am also keenly aware that I was not there. I do not presume that I would have done things differently at that time. I thank God for all the faithful and arduous labor that was exerted under extreme stress to stop John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse and to listen to the victims—as ineffective as it proved to be for many years. As AMBS professor Ted Koontz said elsewhere: "The women who experienced sexual and power abuse by John personally have far too long been sidelined (along with others who were directly abused by other church leaders) and are rightfully at the center of our concern. I nevertheless am aware the hurt caused by John's behavior was and is far-reaching. That circle of hurt includes some who carried major responsibility to work at stopping his abusive behavior, who were unsuccessful, and who were burdened by weight of that failure."

True, there was confusion about who John Howard should be accountable to with various influential church leaders and institutions continuing to send him all over the world even as AMBS leaders of the time discouraged his use as a resource. It took far too long to realize how he was out-manipulating persons who sought to confront him, along with providing his own theological rationalization for his sexual activities.

But it's time to say frankly that we have fallen short. Even those of us now in leadership who weren't remotely involved at the time, must commit to the deep listening needed to get the facts straight. What did actually happen? What was done to address it and what was left undone regrettably, or done poorly, in retrospect? Who suffered because of that failure? Who was disbelieved for too long even as an abuser was allowed to continue his

globetrotting ministry without public censure? In what ways would we respond differently today given the benefit of hindsight and so much learning in the meantime?

Yes, John Howard's ministry was and is an exposition of the Gospel that is reaping an enormous blessing. Thanks be to God! This flawed man was gifted in ways that allowed him to grasp radically good news in the Gospel that needed retelling, reimagining.

Ironically, it is because of that Gospel that we can fearlessly call sin what it is. The far reaching hurt of the evil that was perpetrated and allowed to fester too long must be more fully and publicly acknowledged. It is then that we can move into deeper healing and reconciliation. May it be so!

Tags:

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COMMENTS

Thank you, Dr. Wenger Shenk, for this difficult and important truth-telling. I noticed that the Wikipedia entry on this issue is considerably lacking (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Howard_Yoder#Sexual_Abuse_Allegations) , and wanted to suggest that it be updated to include the position of the AMBS.

Judah 4:28PM 09/28/13

Thank you Phyllis for this thoroughly wise reflection. I only wish it wasn't buried in a place where few people will see it. Just after I noticed your comment, we posted a new blog entry on how this is a teachable moment in the life of our church. Your comments reminded me especially of one of the conversational topics mentioned there: "How do we do theology with real, broken people as our guides? Many of the people whose work shapes our ethics, worship and life together were broken in their personal and academic lives. How do we hold the tension of exclusion and embrace: excluding the things that are oppressive, embracing the things that are helpful? How do we consciously read and assess their work in ways that critically examine what they call us to and boldly name the places where their thinking falls short?"

Sara 2:42PM 09/12/13

Thank you for this post as president of AMBS. Following is a reply I sent to a friend who wondered whether given the pain that once again is being experienced by the Yoder family, the issue could not be laid to rest. In my reply, I address this issue as well as some intuitions about theological implications. My own sense is that this current conversation is needed. Not for John Howard Yoder or his family but for the church. We will never know how he himself dealt with his behavior before he died--ultimately, that is a matter between him and his God. Similarly, the rest of us have no right to know what kind of peace he may or may not have made with his family, nor how they have dealt with this extremely painful issue then or now, when it is being discussed again publicly. My hope and prayer is that the doubtless reopening of old wounds will eventually lead to more healing, though that is likely a lifelong task--as is the task of the rest of us who deal with our own past wounds, albeit within far greater privacy. And I hope that his family will find some solace in recognizing that this time around, the discussion is not really about him and them but about the church. Unfortunately, I think it was probably necessary to make public the violent details and wide scope of his sexually predatory behavior in order to understand the depth of the failure of church leaders in the know to stop it; as well as the general climate within the church that encouraged that failure. Had he been held accountable for his behavior when it was first discovered, many women would not have been victimized—and indeed some human rupture within Yoder himself might have sooner moved toward healing. Hence, the church itself must now recognize its guilt, repent, and initiate the restorative justice needed by his victims that was not completed when he died. And I hope that Yoder's abuse of power with regard to women will stimulate discussion of the church's long history of this kind of abuse, not only in sexual matters but also in other ways. I confess that I myself have a visceral reaction to this story because it excavates the anger I felt growing up knowing that my dreams of certain kinds of church leadership (I wanted to be a pastor) were not open to me. And I can only believe that women who grew up in churches that emphasized female submission in many other ways are finding that this discussion reopens some of those old wounds. And I also think it is valid to consider any relationship between his behavior and his theology, especially as it pertains to his view of the church. I hesitate to venture an opinion here without further reading in his writing, confessing that most of what I know of his thinking is recollections from hearing him in my youth or second-hand from other people's summaries. So what I am sharing here are only intuitions, intuitions of the places in his thinking that, if I wanted to find where the theological bodies are buried, I would start digging. As many others have observed, predatory sexual behavior is only in small if any part about sex; it is primarily about power. And it is my recollection that power is a subject Yoder gave quite a bit of attention to. As I understand it,

he emphasized that we live, derive our ethic based not on the norms of our earthly "kingdom" but of God's heavenly "kingdom" or "reign" which we are to live as if it has already come. Primarily within the church. Within which Jesus is "king." This view gives the church an amazing amount of power, a power which is ripe for abuse in many, many ways. Whether exercised by a magnificently robed Roman Catholic pope and set of cardinals in Rome or a straight-coated pope and church leaders in Goshen, Elkhart, or any other Mennonite church center. Like many others, I am sure, I see the similarities between recent discoveries of the abuse of power in these two churches. It is the kind of abuse that occurs when the reputation and perceived survival of the church seem more important to many of its leaders than justice toward its victims and the preventing of many more. It is also a kind of power that makes it blind to its own existence and the perhaps inevitable if implicit violence in its use. And an inclination to find rationalizations for its use. Regarding the language of power and the church described above, I understand that Yoder's rationalization for his behavior, apparently to himself as well as to his victims and others, was rooted in part in a concept of the church within which we are all sisters and brothers who can behave toward each other according to an ethic of love which is significantly different from the ethic assumed outside the church. I.e., short of intercourse, we can express our love toward each other in physical, clearly sexual ways. Apparently, members of Jesus' "kingdom" are somehow empowered to avoid the pitfalls of such sexual experimentation experienced by the more sinful folk outside. (A kind of self-righteousness vis a vis the "world" outside the church I have alas observed in Mennonite circles elsewhere and on other issues, including pacifism and "nonviolence.") Finally, my recent learning about John Howard Yoder's sexually predatory behavior as well as my recollection (accurate or inaccurate) of some of his theology makes me wonder whether using language of power, and not just specifically male power, to discuss not only the church but also the deity has outlived its usefulness. I am wondering whether conceiving of God as a supreme power doesn't in itself lead to an arrogance on the part of those who claim a close relationship with that deity as well as an excuse for a lack of ethical responsibility on the part of those who "submit" to that power, not to mention the injustice inevitable when this kind of power/submission ratio is encouraged in actual human relationships. Personally, the image of Jesus that speaks to me most deeply is not Jesus as a "king" (did he clearly call himself this?) but Jesus on the cross, the Jesus who acknowledged his companionship with another whom society had named a criminal, the Jesus who felt that God—at least the God seen as ultimate power, if he ever viewed God as such—had forsaken him. I do not intend to say that what we know of Yoder's behavior means we cannot appreciate much of benefit we have learned and will continue to learn from his writing. Those of us who appreciate creative gifts from the past often have to confront inexcusable behavior of their creators. As a lover of Wagner's operas, for example, I have spent considerable time thinking about how to deal with the virulent anti-Semitism in his writings and, often, behavior. And I have decided that while one can certainly find such messages in his operas, they are not the only, and indeed to me, not the most obvious interpretations. And that I have some choice in how I respond to creations that are marvelous in their creative complexity. Similarly, I am sure that if I were a theologian, I would be willing and hopefully able to come to a similar critical appreciation of Yoder's creatively complex legacy.

Phyllis Bixler 7:13AM 09/11/13

I am so incredibly relieved you wrote this timely and vastly important article, Sara! Thank you, cousin! This piece is not only timely but overdue. I am so glad Barbra Graber has finally been heard and taken seriously, knowing she's been talking about this and other similar issues for decades, often not 'heard' or 'taken' seriously! Thank you, thank you. I've also thanked the editors at Canadian Mennonite for reprinting your piece which came to our mailbox yesterday. May all of us be fuller of grace, love, and freedom, giving yet fuller respect and dignity to all people and all of our stories, no matter how politically correct or 'incorrect' they may seem at the time! In fact, the 'politics of Jesus' keep getting wider, deeper, and more full of meaning. This is a new day for peace and renewal, where, previously, there had been violation and neglect.

Carol Ann Weaver 1:41PM 08/22/13

AMBS' actions surrounding John Yoder's teaching, scholarship and the women he hurt reflect a strong desire to be restorative. They also raise several thorny problems. I met Yoder in Basel at the MCC house and was his student at AMBS in the 1960s. His Politics provided me with key ideas on non-violence, peace and meta-history, which I presented as secular and human constructs to right-wing Evangelical students and colleagues for over thirty years. I spoke with Yoder in the 1990s at a time he happened to be awaiting the Church's verdict on his behavior with which he was eager to comply. Clearly the women he harmed need to be heard. They must be invited to play a role in setting time, place, conditions and parameters of any hearing. The AMBS faculty statement of guidelines, on how to present Yoder to students, reflects a faculty unaccustomed to offering critical

comments to colleagues. I noticed that critical comments were regarded as impolite and unwelcome when I served on a committee of the Institute of Mennonite studies some years ago. In fact, evaluation and a critical reading of content should be routine and a condition of employment at AMBS. Academics ought to treat the work of all colleagues and scholars analytically and be willing to take issue with it. AMBS' Agreements on how to present him to students on various topics, sounds reasonable enough, but is full of inconsistencies. Will AMBS examine possible tension between the academic work and behavior of all of its faculty and of all authors of books used in the classroom? The Agreements also risk placing Yoder at the center of many discussions. Marriage, family, power and authority are vital topics to which many others have made important contributions over the years. To insert Yoder's work into such courses gives him greater significance than he deserves. Remember, Yoder was not the only flawed person. We are everywhere. President Shenk vividly captures the two-fold nature of Yoder's career. She refers to him both as an abuser responsible for harm done to women, and she calls us to give thanks to God for his ability to proclaim the Gospel. Shenk's call to truth-telling about what really happened and calling sin what it is raises its own questions as to what truth, goodness and badness are. The pained women deserve to tell their truth, but I doubt that AMBS will have any more success in fearlessly calling sin what it is, than Adam and Eve had in their pursuit of the knowledge of good and evil. We also know that every narrative has a parallel history told by others. Since one party to the truth and to what really happened is dead its voice will be missing. Mennonites are a part of the history where our search to identify sin undermines our message that God has acted decisively in Jesus to effect salvation for the world, and has defeated sin. I wish the Seminary all the best as it seeks to fulfill its Spirit-filled academic mission. John Klassen, PhD Professor Emeritus Department of History Trinity Western University Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1

John Klassen 12:57PM 08/20/13

So glad to read these welcome words. Thank you for offering hope into a devastatingly difficult, ongoing situation and for encouraging truth-telling. Along with so many others, I long for justice and healing in all of the many ways they are needed.

Hilary J. Scarsella 2:37PM 08/06/13

In order for healing and hope to flow through us we need to face together as a church the hurt and shame JHY produced toward so many sisters. My hope is that this case will help us work toward prevention as we ask "What have we learned about our self as a church?" I am expecting God's Justice be done in these important steps. Let us ask the pastoral question to the victims: "What do you need at these time for healing?"

Elizabeth Soto 5:12AM 08/01/13

We will never know the full extent of emotional pain and loss of faith in God and in the Mennonite Church caused by Yoder's abusive behavior and the church's decades of failure to effectively discipline him. I suspect our pride at having him put Mennonites on the world theological stage is a factor in the freedom he was given to continue travelling the world representing us even after it was known he was sexually abusive at home and abroad. There is much for which the church needs to repent in this sad story. But it is exciting to imagine what blessings of spiritual vitality and missional effectiveness might await us as a church and her institutions if we will confess, make amends, learn from our tragic mistakes, and bring some measure of closure to this unfinished story. Thank you, Sara, for your courageous willingness to help lead us forward through this messy but important work.

Carolyn Holderread Heggen 7:24PM 07/29/13

Years later, it still the courage of a woman to deal with this as it should have been. Thank you Sara!

Norman Berry 7:14PM 07/29/13

Thank you, Sara, for using your wisdom, guidance and compassion to address this issue. May God continue to bless you abundantly.

bonnie whittier 6:17PM 07/29/13

This man was/is not the only male church leader who committed such abuses. As long as he is being alternately vilified and glorified while other transgressors go unmentioned, it serves only to create a sacrificial lamb for the church to hook its own failings on to "the Other" and continue to permit the critical analysis of exactly why sexual abuse exists in the church and in society in general. I was a family member of a renowned church leader, and when he was investigated my testimony was given little regard, and he got off scot free "because he is old and retired now and no longer in direct leadership roles." The very structure of the church, its historical roots, and its reinforcement of a false hierarchy of males creates the underpinning of abuse of all sorts, but especially the abuse of children and other vulnerable creations. Only when those structures are completely dismantled can a beginning of credibility be hoped for in the "mission" of the church.

Annie Wenger-Nabigon 7:53PM 07/28/13
!!!! Thank you, Sara, for your thoughtful statement and willingness to work at this. I am grateful!
Jennifer Gingerich 11:33AM 07/27/13
Thank you, Sara. I have heard personally one story of a woman who suffered from Yoder's abuses, including being accused by seminary leaders of being responsible for the problem. Your words strike a helpful chord. I encourage further conversations by AMBS leaders with women who were part of the AMBS family and thus were doubly hurt. Could current AMBS leaders ask for pardon? I know this is a difficult question (how do we take responsibility for others' sins, or even mistakes?) Yet it seems worth the effort.
Nancy Heisey 8:32AM 07/27/13
Thank you, Sara,
Shirley B Yoder 6:41AM 07/27/13
There is so much here to try to get my mind and soul around. Sara, it does my heart good to read how you've brought so much of it - maybe all of it - together in one entry.
Becky Schaller 10:36PM 07/26/13
Thank you Sara, (and Ervin Stutzman and Ted Koontz) with great appreciation for your willingness to listen deeply, and for your courage to shine a light. Know that I and many others stand with you, shoulder to shoulder, in this well articulated commitment to a "new transparency of truth telling." At this propitious time, your vision promises to renew and reinvigorate our Church in ways we've never dreamed before. With sincerest gratitude.
Barbra Graber 6:19PM 07/26/13
Part of the journey toward reconciliation involves reparation, taking steps to repair the breach created by sin (theologically speaking). Often reparation involves telling and acknowledging that there are multiple truths which makes reconciliation difficult to attain, and this is part of what's been missing from conversations about Yoder. What this blog post describes was/is a brave thing to do — thank you AMBS.
Malinda Elizabeth Berry 3:45PM 07/26/13
Well said sister!
Steve Shenk 12:17PM 07/26/13