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To the Next Generation of Pacifist Theologians

by LISA SCHIRCH *on* Mar 4, 2015 • 11:57 pm

14 Comments

Lisa Schirch

In a new book of essays by Yoderian theologians, edited by J. Denny Weaver and entitled "John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian," peace and justice scholar and activist, Lisa Schirch writes an insightful Afterword. We are honored to republish it here. Dr. Lisa Schirch is Director of Human Security at the Alliance for Peacebuilding and a Research Professor at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice & Peacebuilding. Schirch works to support human security, including ending sexual and gender-based violence. Her books and other publications focus on how to build peace and prevent violence in a wide range of contexts. Her daily work involves teaching peacebuilding to the US military. BG

Yoder, the radical follower of Jesus—the Jewish pacifist. Yoder, the brilliant and prolific theologian. Yoder, the awkward and sexually abusive man. Yoder, the man whom the church protected. This book, "John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian," paints a portrait of an exceptionally complicated, gifted, and troublesome man.

The talented male authors of the book are long on their contribution to the study of Yoder and his many contributions. Their careful scholarship brings out an important analysis of key themes in Yoder's many publications, particularly the fact that Yoder draws attention to Jesus as the primary source for Christian theologians as opposed to those who simply build on nicene orthodoxy. It is a positive step forward that these male authors condemn Yoder's abuse in these chapters. The stated agenda of the book was to describe Yoder's methodology. But by virtue of their identities, the authors in this book cannot speak from the perspectives of women, a problem addressed in this afterword. A book in 2014 on any topic, but particularly a book on John Howard Yoder, requires an analysis from women scholars, including victims of Yoder's assaults, as well as from Latino, African, Asian, and Pacific theologians, from people of diverse sexual orientations, and from peace building practitioners who draw inspiration from Yoder to translate pacifist theology into pragmatic, real-world strategies.

I write this afterword as a woman born and raised in the Mennonite Church. I have seen the negative effects of Yoder's assaults and the church's delayed response impact three generations of Mennonite women over the last thirty years in over a dozen Mennonite institutions. Some of Yoder's victims were his peers in his own generation. Some were his students, in the next generation. Women in both of these generations who spoke about the assaults experienced significant backlash. In today's world, a third generation of women theologians continues to be marginalized for their critique of Yoder and the church. I am not aware of any female Yoderian scholars, an important point that Weaver notes in the beginning of this book. Today's Bible and theology departments at Mennonite institutions are predominantly male. In my opinion, Yoder's assaults on women and the broader church's protection of Yoder at the expense of women's safety are important reasons why many talented Mennonite women pacifist theologians have left the Mennonite Church and have moved on to other denominations.

Women's voices and analysis are essential to the conversation on Yoder's role in Christian theology. Future generations of theologians reading Yoder need to hear their voices. Mennonite women such as Ruth Krall and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, Barbra Graber, Sara Wenger Shenk, Linda Gehman Peachey, Hannah Heinzekehr, Stephanie Krehbiel, Charletta Erb, and others write on sexual abuse and have made recommendations to the church on how to address Yoder's abuse. These women offer a fair acknowledgment of Yoder's contributions and his humanity. This afterword summarizes some of the contributions of these women and includes information directly sourced from one of Yoder's victims.

I write this afterword from the perspective of a peacebuilding practitioner. John Howard Yoder's theology positively impacted the field of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding requires a set of ethics and processes. As a pacifist, I concur

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with Yoder himself on the need to speak out against injustice and affirm the humanity of all people, even perpetrators. Yoder's abusive actions are a tragedy for the women victims, a tragedy for Yoder's family, and a tragedy for Yoder's legacy and those who devoted their lives to being "Yoderian" scholars. There is still important peacebuilding work for the church to do in order to address the pain from the past and recover the integrity of peace theology. This afterword identifies a peace building agenda for the church in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly.

In 2014, the Mennonite Church is undergoing a "John Howard Yoder Discernment Group." In his message to Mennonite Church USA, conference moderator Ervin Stutzman listed the shared assumptions about Yoder's behavior. These include the following:

- We know abuse happened.
- We know there are victims—some known, some not known.
- We know wounds remain unhealed.
- We know that despite previous efforts by church leaders to stop the abuse and to enable healing, further work on the part of the church is being called for and is indeed needed.
- We know the truth will set us free.

The goals of the group are to listen to and contribute to the healing of all those impacted by Yoder's abusive actions and the church's response; to thank those women who have tenaciously worked to have the abuse addressed; and to prepare a churchwide process for lament, prevention of abuse, and healing for victims and offenders. No one stands to gain from ignoring or covering up what happened. We all need healing. The victims are not responsible for hurting Yoder's reputation by reporting on his assaults. And Mennonite women writers urging the church to address victim's wounds are not guilty of defaming Yoder's name. Yoder alone is responsible for the damage to his credibility. No one stands to gain financially or politically from knowing the truth. In contrast, everyone stands to heal and recover integrity from acknowledging what happened, lamenting the harm it caused to so many, and deciding, as men and women in the church, to move the pacifist agenda forward by ensuring that sexual abuse ends. The goal of this afterword is not to de-Yoderize peace theology by taking Yoder's contributions away. The goal is to deodorize peace theology—healing the sickening wounds of silence requires the light and oxygen of public acknowledgment and lament. Even Yoder's most ardent male supporters seem to agree that the soul of Yoder's pacifist, radical Christian theology depends on a critical analysis of Yoder's actions toward women and the church's equally appalling actions in protecting Yoder at the expense of the safety of his women students and women in the church. If theologians fail to understand fully the causes and consequences of Yoder's abuse and the church's long delays in justice, what hope is there for the future of pacifist theology? For the next generation of theologians reading this book, here are six ideas to consider if the church wants to recover the integrity of pacifist theology from this tragedy.

(1) Yoder committed both sins of sexual immorality and acts of domination in sexual assaults.

Sexual immorality and sexual assaults are two different types of behavior and imply different types of harm. Evidence seems to suggest that Yoder had extramarital relationships with women who desired a relationship with Yoder and pursued his attention. At the very least, this was immoral sexual behavior. But at least some of these women were admiring students who came to Yoder to be mentored. excerpts of their adoring letters can be found online. Scholarly research on sexual abuse details that people in positions of power may use that power to attract sexual attention. No relationship involving a differential of power (such as a professor and an admiring student) can be truly consensual.2 But between fifty and a hundred other women theologians indicated to Mennonite leaders that they did not invite sexual advances from Yoder, yet he forcibly kissed them, groped their private parts, wrote them sexually explicit letters, seemed to stalk them on their way to their homes late at night, and even physically jumped on them (p. 370). These are acts of domination that tore at the dignity of the brilliant and potentially powerful women Yoder deliberately chose to violate. Yoder's violence changed the lives of these women.

New York Times writer Mark Oppenheimer's 2013 article on Yoder's sexual assaults asks the remaining critical question about Yoder's scholarship: "Can a bad person be a good theologian?" at what point does our bad behavior overwhelm or negate our writings about doing good? In today's world, Yoder's actions would be legally identified as sexual harassment and sexual assault. It is appropriate then to speak of Yoder's crimes against women. In today's world, institutions are legally responsible for addressing sexual harassment and sexual assault. Thus church leaders who knew of Yoder's actions but did not take aggressive action would also be criminally liable in today's world. Having new language and laws to identify Yoder and the church's actions offers us more insight on the seriousness of their actions. It is not anachronistic to name behavior as criminal just because the laws on sexual harassment have evolved. Slavery was always criminal even though slavery was technically legal for centuries. Naming an action as criminal helps the church recognize the seriousness of the situation and the need to take preemptive action to ensure the safety of women in the church. Despite the seriousness of Yoder's actions, I am not aware of anyone asserting the need for any type of formal criminal justice process against Yoder or the church. No one suggests that Yoder's theology should be thrown out because of the abuse or that he did not make other positive contributions in his personal life.

Excuses for Yoder abound. Some blame the victims, suggesting they all wanted Yoder's sexual attention. Some downplay the harm from his "sexual experiments." Some blame his asperger-like symptoms of social awkwardness. Yoder's followers are eager to move back to their main pursuit of discussing Yoder's pacifist theology. But to name Yoder's behavior as "abuse" is more honest. Yoder was self-aware about what he was doing to women, as he offered elaborate justifications for it in his final posthumous writings on punishment.4

In her book on Yoder's abuse titled The Elephant in God's Living Room: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder—Collected Essays, Ruth Krall asks critical questions about what shaped Yoder's view of women and what

went wrong in his life that led to his sexual assaults on women. Krall's book is by far the most helpful clinical and psychological analysis of what Yoder himself may have suffered or experienced that influenced his abusive actions. Krall and others note that Yoder had many normal, healthy, and even pastoral social interactions and was not abusive in all aspects of his life. Krall writes on page 17, "While occasionally his harassing actions may have been opportunistic ones, in most reported situations they appeared to be pre-planned and methodically carried out. Potential victims were identified and they were groomed for acts of victimization."

In the tradition of great pacifists who reach out to those causing harm, women writers like Ruth Krall have gone out of their way to affirm Yoder's humanity and to lament that the church failed not only the victims but also Yoder and his family by not stopping his abuse sooner.

Future generations of pacifist theologians should not diminish or excuse the harms Yoder caused but should acknowledge and lament the tragic consequences of Yoder's immoral and sexually violent actions and the effect they have had on women, his family, and the pacifist tradition.

(2) The church itself needs to take responsibility for the institutionalized patriarchal setting that contributed to Yoder's abuse. Yoder grew out of a patriarchal church, and his writings as a white man reflect this privileged status.

A toxic cocktail of patriarchy, sexual repression, and entitled leadership beyond reproach contributes to religious leaders around the world committing a high rate of sexual abuse. In a Christian Century article titled "Evangelicals 'worse' than Catholics on Sexual abuse," which quotes leading Christian voices working to stop such abuse, it is stated that "too many Protestant institutions have sacrificed souls in order to protect their institutions." In this context, Yoder's abuse of his power as a professor was a symptom of a much wider problem.

Peacebuilding requires looking at root causes, not just symptoms of violence. Rather than blaming or diagnosing Yoder alone, a peacebuilding response to Yoder's abuse requires the church at large to examine the sickness of patriarchy. Yoder's abuse needs to be viewed in the context of the church's affirmation of patriarchy, where men are granted systematic entitlement to positions of power. Patriarchal systems limit women's access to education and positions of power and view women as second- class citizens.

Given the pervasiveness of institutionalized patriarchy, it would be surprising if Yoder's writing did not reflect patriarchal beliefs. As indicative of his patriarchal beliefs, Stephanie Krehbiel cites Yoder's description of women in his most recent, posthumous book, The End of Sacrifice, which seems to have been written in response to women's call for accountability for his assaults: "More recently men as a class have come to be vulnerable in a new way, as compensation for pain suffered by women, when that pain can be blamed upon the prior patriarchal tilt of our society." In the footnote to this sentence, Yoder added,

> There should be room, logically, for the objection that beneficent patriarchal care, properly understood and benevolently exercised, would not be harmful; that what has hurt women has been the violation, not the implementation, of proper fatherly caring. This excuse would however not change the retaliatory dynamics, since the root of the power of the punitive drive is located not merely in a mistake the stronger party made but in the weaker party's anger at being weaker.6

Yoder suggests that women's anger at men is not necessarily due to men (such as he) having victimized women, but rather that women are angry because they are "weaker" than men. Yoder seems to see himself as an innocent symbol or scapegoat for women's anger at patriarchy.

Further, Yoder's earlier writing on the idea of "revolutionary subordination" did not resonate with many women, as discussed by Gerald Mast in chapter 8 of this volume ("Pacifism as a way of Knowing"). Yoder identified patriarchy as a problem. But Yoder's writing is cryptic and a little too eager to emphasize women's subordination in biblical cultural context without providing a vision for equal relations between men and women in today's church. Hannah Heinzekehr argues, "[Yoder's] theology seemed to veer dangerously close to setting up frameworks that would not just allow . . . abuse to happen, but made it seem somehow honorable or noble." Women should not suffer domestic violence or sexual assaults or view subordination of their identity as having redemptive power. In order to willfully subordinate, one must have a sense of agency and empowerment. One must feel entitled to respect in order to submit to disrespect. In this book, Weaver and Mast's chapter "Extending John Howard Yoder's Theology" makes these points in its discussion of atonement theology.

South Africans only chose nonviolent resistance after a concerted movement of Black consciousness to unlearn the oppressive practice of teaching black South African children that they were less human than white South African children. In Latin America, Paulo Freire described the process of "conscientization" as a necessary first step before impoverished Brazilians could start the revolutionary process of nonviolently questioning their oppressive government. In the women's liberation movement, developing a feminist consciousness of "women's

power" is also a primary step. As a woman and a peacebuilding practitioner who advocates non- violent resistance, I believe revolutionary subordination requires two conditions.

a) Suffering requires empowerment. Empowerment comes from self- awareness and a lucid power analysis to identify that oppression is unjust and unnatural. Every human being deserves dignity. But not every person recognizes this human right in a world of social hierarchy and humiliation. Jesus critiqued the oppressive religious, social, and political powers of his day. He told downtrodden people like the Samaritan woman at the well that she was worthy of his respect and that she was a child of God. Only empowered people conscious of their right to dignity can make subordination revolutionary. Without empowerment, subordination may become internalized oppression where victims choose subordination because they cannot imagine that they deserve dignity.

b) Suffering must be a voluntary choice. In most cases, suffering is revolutionary only if there are other choices that do not require suffering. Jesus had a choice other than the cross. His choice to suffer made the subordination revolutionary. But many people do not have other choices.

As a woman peacebuilding practitioner, there are times in my life when I willfully choose powerlessness and to believe in the strategy of revolutionary subordination. When I was living in Kabul, Afghanistan, to conduct research on Afghan perspectives on peacebuilding during the years 2009–2011, I chose to live in an unarmed guesthouse, knowing full well that most foreigners had armed guards and stayed in gated hotels. Choosing subordination and vulnerability made sense—not having armed guards sent an important message to both my Afghan colleagues and to any Taliban or insurgents watching my movements that I was not part of the foreign occupation. I also choose revolutionary subordination when I provide training on peacebuilding at U.S. military bases. I am often the only woman and the only civilian in a room full of military leaders in uniforms. I make a choice to enter a space where my audience often opposes and belittles my experience. I speak diplomatically but forcefully on the rights of civilians and the alternatives to war even as I feel the silent and invisible poison darts coming at me as I speak.

In other contexts, I deliberately avoid subordination. While attending graduate school in Washington DC, there were times when I would have to walk late at night, and I chose to carry hot pepper spray so that I would be able to defend myself by nonlethal means, if necessary. When men in my church belittle my contributions, I confront the substance of their critique. While I may be willing to choose to die or suffer for my beliefs in some situations, I will not willfully submit to humiliation and violence in a context where those in my own community deny my personal agency. Most girls around the world are taught to be submissive. Their subordination is not revolutionary, as it is not chosen. When women's subordination is forced, it is violent.

People who have a critical mass of supporters in their homes and communities may develop an internal strength so that they can engage in this "revolutionary subordination" from a place of power and choice. Women tend to share their stories of sexual abuse and discrimination with each other, in order to become conscious of the systematic, impersonal denigration of our individual and collective voices. A feminist conscience and a community of other women who share a gender analysis of the church enable me to engage critically but respectfully on issues of sexual abuse. Women in the church who lack such feminist support either stay quiet and subordinate, or they walk away from an oppressive church whose "body politic" excludes and dismisses their voices.

Yoder, of course, was a white male, as are most of his followers. They operate in a patriarchal church that only recently has made important strides to include women. These patriarchal structures did not protect women in the church. Since Yoder assaulted many of his female students and rising female church leaders, his actions directly impacted a generation of women's leadership. The continuing absence of women in so many centers of pacifist theology at Mennonite institutions today means that new generations of pacifist theologians may also not be informed by a gender or power analysis or take into consideration the privilege and entitlements that males enjoy. Even putting Yoder's behavior with women aside, new generations of pacifist theologians need to bring other lenses and voices to engage with Yoder's theological concepts, including "revolutionary subordination." The church at large, and pacifist theologians in particular, need to critique patriarchy and embrace a wider set of ideas about pacifism and how it relates to people in different social positions.

(3) Christian pacifism is not dependent on the credibility or idolatry of Yoder.

The outline of this afterword came together as I was explaining to my fourteen-year-old daughter the three ways Yoder's life and works impacted my life. First, I told her that Yoder's theology influenced a generation of my mentors and colleagues at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. Mennonites worked for peace before Yoder. But without Yoder, it might have taken much longer for the Mennonite Church to translate pacifist theology into institutionalized efforts in restorative justice and peacebuilding. I have spent most of my life attending or working for Mennonite institutions. I grew up in a church that often seemed to be as Yoder-centric as it was Jesus-centric. Countless people have come to see Jesus as a "Jewish pacifist" and have understood the political message in the

Bible because of Yoder. I might not be working in the field of peacebuilding had it not been for Yoder's contributions to those who mentored me. But I came to devote my life to peacebuilding and pacifism without ever having read Yoder. Other mentors and authors in the church—not Yoder—taught me to support peace and justice.

The two Mennonite professors who had the most impact on my understanding of pacifist theology were mental health clinician-theologian Ruth Krall(7) and musician Carol Ann Weaver, whose own academic training prepared them to bring a wider set of questions to teaching theology. These women steered me toward a reading list on feminist theology, liberation theology, and black theology. I read Mary Daly and Starhawk alongside Martin Luther King and Gandhi, two other powerful pacifist men from patriarchal contexts who faced allegations of sexual impropriety. From this broader theological perspective, Yoder's theses in "The Politics of Jesus" did not seem radical when I read them later in my life. The final chapter in this volume, Gerald Mast's "Sin and Failure in Anabaptist Theology," is an important effort to begin to have a dialogue between Yoder and theologians who self-identify as feminist, womanist, black or liberation theologians.

Second, I draw on Yoder's work to explain why it makes sense for me, a Mennonite, to be married to a Jew. My daughter identifies herself as both Jewish and Mennonite. Yoder's writing on Jesus as Jewish pacifist and on the Jewish-Christian schism, discussed in Weaver and Mast's and Weaver and Zimmerman's chapters, will make important contributions to my children's ability to theologically justify their identity to the wider Christian church (if they ever care to do so!).

Third, when other Mennonites denounced my work to educate the United States government and military about peacebuilding, Yoder's theology as well as his own work with the ROTC program at the University of Notre Dame helped me articulate a theological justification to the church for this practical engagement of the U.S. military. Yoder's concept of speaking about religious ethics through secular terms or "middle axioms" gave me theological justification for talking to governments and military forces about human rights, violence against women, the structural causes of violence, and how to build peace. I did not start to work with the military because of Yoder. Rather, Yoder's writings helped me articulate the theological basis for my work to a conservative Christian audience who questioned reaching out to "the enemy."

As a peacebuilding practitioner, I recognize that all of us who work for peace are less than perfect. If we were to wait for a perfect messenger to speak on peace and justice, we would greatly hinder any progress toward improving the human condition. Yet the true measure of the quality of witnessing for peace is not what you say, but what you do. The inconsistencies in the lives of most peace and justice practitioners are far less dramatic than Yoder's.

The real-world applications of pacifist theology in the fields of restorative justice and peacebuilding provide the next generation of theologians with a much more compelling vision of pacifism. It is much easier to "see" a pacifist Jesus in the men and women who are running victim-offender reconciliation programs, facilitating dialogue between Muslims and Christians, advocating for social justice, or training the Congolese military in how to respect women's rights. I would choose to admire the silent, humble generosity of a quiet peacebuilder long before I would applaud an articulate theologian who pushed women down and jumped on them.

Yoder has a place on our bookshelves, but not on a pedestal. The integrity of pacifist theology does not depend on Yoder. Idolatry of Yoder is wrong. First, it diminishes the voices of the victims he hurt. Second, it stumbles and contorts itself to align a theology of peace with the actions of an abusive man. Third, it pulls attention away from the many other pacifist voices whose lives and writings better illuminate the pacifist path. The authors of this book deserve to be read in their own right. They make important contributions to Christian pacifism. a new generation of Christian pacifists should be read not for their insights on Yoder, but for their own unique contributions.

(4) Pacifism and feminism require the same ethical commitments.

"This world is crazy." My daughter shook her head as I told her of Yoder's assaults. Like most women around the world, I have a duty as a mother to prepare my daughter to live in a world where some people will devalue her humanity and underestimate her intellect. She needs to learn how to respond to the epidemic of men who assault women (approximately one in three women will be assaulted in their lifetime).

There is no gap between pacifism and feminism. Ruth Krall taught me to ask this question: "Why is sexual violence and domestic violence tolerated by Mennonites when military violence is not tolerated? Both forms of violence shared in the sinfulness of the human community. Both destroyed human life and well-being. Neither represented a divine will for the human community." So I explained to my daughter that as a Mennonite pacifist, feminist, peacebuilding practitioner, I care just as much about ending war in Afghanistan and Syria as I do about the safety of girls and women who suffer a shocking level of attack on their humanity. The link between public violence and private violence is evidenced in the rape of women in the midst of war, in the alarming rates of domestic abuse on military training bases, and in the level of sexual violence in the patriarchal church.

Unlike Yoder and many other Mennonite pacifist theologians, my life's work has been about connecting the public violence of war with the private violence of domestic violence and violence against women. Pacifism and feminism both recognize the dignity and humanity of all people while seeking to end the harm that comes in any act of violence, domination, or subordination. Weaver's book The Nonviolent Atonement is an example of a male pacifist who embraces feminism. Mast also cites feminist and womanist writers in this book. But all too often, women alone are left to speak out on sexual violence or devote their careers to the difficult work of raising issues of sexual violence in the church.

Feminism is a call to a new relationship between men and women based on mutual respect. Feminism fosters opportunities for women's leadership and appreciation of women's contributions to society. Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings. Feminism is not about hating men. Most feminists are married to men. Men

can be feminists too. Feminism is inherently pacifist. There are no calls for women to take up arms against men or to punish men.

Feminism requires a commitment to stop sexual violence against women and men. Because there is so much violence in the world against women, many feminists are indeed angry and want to stop this selective violence. Feminism requires listening to women's unique perspectives, acknowledging the differences in men's experiences and women's experiences without deeming one more valuable than the other.

Art by Laurie-Lynn McGlynn, Soul in State: Pain

Peacebuilding is a process of putting hands and feet on pacifism and feminism. Peacebuilding requires practical strategies of empowerment, building relationships that illustrate the dignity of every human being, and advocating for just social relations. Peacebuilding requires that we view as equally damaging any harm done to children, women and men, to workers, to the environment, and to countries gripped by war.

When a country invades another country to secure its oil interests, that is violence. When a corporation exploits workers and destroys the environment, that is violence. When a man pushes a woman down and gropes her in his office, that is violence too. When the church criticizes women for naming abuse committed by a powerful church leader, and when it demands harmony, silences women's voices, and protects a perpetrator, that too is violence. An engaged pacifist theology needs to be concerned about all these forms of violence.

Yet to this day, there are two places where I am usually the only woman in the room: when I am training the military in peacebuilding and when I am discussing pacifist theology. When it comes to security and theology, the men who hold powerful positions in the U.S. military and in the church's theological institutions often actively exclude women's voices and approaches. What is the explanation for this? Are women less intelligent? Less ambitious? Do we have fewer opportunities for higher education? Are many women just not interested in security and theology? Or do men actively exclude, overlook, or even denigrate women because it is easier to work with "their own kind" and it can be difficult to "fit in" a woman's perspective?

In my opinion, women are left out of discussions on security and theology because we have a different set of experiences that lead us to hold different opinions. In both settings, we define violence differently. Some men are uncomfortable with our anger and our perspectives. So we are left out of conferences, books, and collegial circles between our academic peers. Because women's understandings of security and theology are so different, women also self-select not to put themselves in situations where they will be a minority voice. Women seek safer pastures in which to tend their intellectual sheep.

Future generations of pacifist theologians need to interrogate this pattern. Pacifist theologians need to engage directly with feminist writers. Pacifist theologians need to read and engage the community addressing sexual violence with the same intensity with which they address violence by the state. They need to study women's writings, advocate among men to stop violence against women, and illustrate with their lives their desire to empower women's leadership and to make space for women's voices.

(5) Yoder and the Church that loved him damaged a radical pacifist agenda and undermined the politics of Jesus.

Jesus questioned the authority and self-interest of Jewish leaders in his day. Early Anabaptists shared this skepticism of church and state authorities. Like Jesus, they seemed to have no interest in creating or maintaining institutions. As part of the anabaptist tradition, Yoder questions church and state authority with a pacifist ethic. Unlike other theologians who seem to have more interest in consolidating the power and control of the church over its followers than in following Jesus, Yoder asks Christians to question authority.

In the authority-questioning tradition of Jesus and the anabaptists, pacifist theologians should question the self-interest of the church in addressing sexual violence. Ruth Krall documents the Mennonite Church's delays in responding to Yoder's violence:

> *For more than twenty years denominational administrative personnel officers and chief executives managed allegations, rumors, and gossip about Yoder's behavior by secrecy and by facilitating geographical and professional work relocations. They chose, therefore, a preferential option to maintain Yoder's theological career as a spokesperson for a Mennonite theology of non-violence and cultural identity rather than a preferential option to provide safety to vulnerable women potentially in Yoder's grasp. Thus, denominational leaders, knowingly or unwittingly, created a hostile religious climate in which Yoder's behavior could continue and proliferate. Victims and potential victims were left to fend for themselves. Ideology, institutional authority and denominational leader power, therefore, trumped a viable living communal praxis of justice, accountability,*

individual healing and collective reconciliation.12 Women who did try to warn other women of Yoder's potential assaults were chastised for "gossiping" and disrupting the harmony of the church. When women later brought their stories—first privately and then publicly—to the attention of Mennonite leaders in the hope that they would stop Yoder's behavior, Yoder threatened a lawsuit against them and accused some of them of not being "sophisticated." Some people in the church accused them of making up the stories or of seducing Yoder themselves, asking, "why didn't they just say no?" (Reports suggest that Yoder accepted "no" from some women, but harassed others for many months after they said no.) Some in the church accused the women of hurting Yoder's family and spreading false rumors. In other words, Yoder and the church punished the victims and the victims' supporters for speaking the truth.13

Yoder is responsible for hurting his victims. Yoder, not his victims, is responsible for hurting his family. And Yoder, not his victims or their supporters, are responsible for hurting the pacifist agenda.

Krehbiel argues the church's response was "too little, too late, and more about institutional damage control than about justice or healing for Yoder's victims."14 While the field of restorative justice drew theological inspiration from Yoder's writings,15 there was nothing restorative about the church's process of addressing Yoder's abuse. Restorative justice is victim-centered. Church institutions offered forgiveness to Yoder, not the victims. Restorative justice does not seek to punish. Rather, in restorative justice offenders acknowledge and take responsibility for the harms they have done to others. The church "punished" Yoder in a variety of ways, including banning him from attending church. But the victims were not in the center of the church's first attempts at addressing the abuse.

Some of the women who experienced Yoder's assaults wrote letters to him, first asking him to stop writing them inappropriate letters. Yoder did not stop. Some women also assert that they themselves wrote Yoder long letters detailing the pain and harm his assaults caused in their lives.

Reportedly, Yoder never felt remorse for his actions that caused this pain, nor did he apologize directly to these women.16 As noted earlier, his professional writing after the church process laid out a complex justification for his behavior and seemed to blame women themselves for the pain they suffered.

The church's efforts to protect Yoder's family also seem inept at best, if not a double victimization of their own suffering related to Yoder's actions. Yoder reportedly cooperated with church leaders in what may have been numerous painful meetings at the kitchen table, most likely led by well-meaning church leaders with little experience or knowledge of sexual abuse. Krall notes, "By not recognizing Yoder's suffering and by not recognizing the women's suffering their shared faith community failed in its collective spiritual task of bringing healing to them."17

The church has evolved in the last twenty years. There are new safeguards in place for women in the church. The Mennonite Church's process of discernment is a positive sign that the church is taking responsibility for addressing the harms that Yoder and the church itself did to Yoder's victims. Future generations of pacifist theologians will need to continue to challenge institutions to use a moral compass and not their status, power, or financial interests to guide them through the thicket of sexual violence in the church.

It is ironic that Yoder, the radical theologian, advocated biblical teachings on justice and peace with his words but led the church away from Jesus' radical teachings with his actions. In this book, Zimmerman quotes Yoder regarding the split between Swiss reformer Zwingli and the anabaptists: "To place the unity of Zürich above the faithfulness of the church is not only to abandon the church; it is also the demonization of the state, for persecution becomes a theological necessity."18 In the same way, to place the unity of the Mennonite Church above the faithfulness of the church is not only to abandon the church; it was the demonization of the church, since the required silencing of women's voices—a form of persecution—became a theological necessity.

Naming wrongdoing by Yoder and the institutional church is not out of lack of care for Yoder's legacy or the church. Rather, it illustrates that we do care about the pacifist agenda and the integrity of the church.

Future generations of pacifist theologians can restore credibility to pacifism not by downplaying Yoder's actions but by naming the abuses, lamenting the harm done to the victims and to Yoder's family, and working to end sexual abuse in the church.

(6) Moving forward requires all of us to do things differently.

The magnitude of the impact of Yoder's abuse and the church's long delays in addressing it require action to make things right. Peacebuilding requires truth-telling, victim-centered restorative justice, new initiatives to prevent future sexual violence, and both lament and trauma healing for Yoder's victims, family, and the church as a whole. Krall argues that in order to move forward, we need first to collectively reflect.

[It is in] acknowledgement of the factual truth of an abuser's fully embodied life that we and future generations begin to free ourselves and our communities to make different behavioral choices than he chose to make during his lifetime. Acknowledging the legacy of good he did in his lifetime frees us from the need to demonize him. Recognizing the legacy of harm he did to us and to others frees us from idolatry. Once free, we can view his life as

a precautionary tale that teaches us, and future generations, what not to do. In recognizing and speaking the factual truth of our lives, we individually and collectively free ourselves and future generations from the tyranny of his legacy of abuse. If we allow it to do so, a perpetrator's abusive life and the harm he did to others can serve as a searchlight that reveals the fault lines in the communal realities we once shared with him. If we allow his life, in all of its complexities, to teach us, we can examine the painful realities and fault lines of our own lives.19

Perhaps this book is a start on that journey. I laud the authors of this book for naming Yoder's actions as abusive and beginning to question the church that protected him. But there is more work to do.

Barbra Graber lays out specific strategies for moving forward. These include the following:

1. Anyone writing or speaking about Yoder should directly name Yoder's actions as "sexual assaults and abuse" rather than call it "inappropriate behavior" or other ambiguous terms relating to his social skills.

2. Journalists should acknowledge the harm Yoder did along with his accomplishments.

3. Church leaders should commit to doing justice for Yoder's victims and in every sexual abuse case.

4. Men should learn more about sexual violence against women and take steps to address it in their own communities.

5. Peace and justice educators should make clear that sexual violence is an issue of equal concern as war and public violence.

6. Church leaders should speak out on sexual violence in sermons and in their congregational life, to enable public conversation to address private violence.

7. Victims should find ways to get support and voice their experiences, so as to prevent violence against others in the future.

I would add one more to Graber's list. The widespread impact of Yoder's theology on global scholars and practitioners requires a broader set of voices from authors of diverse identities. My colleague Howard Zehr has made a commitment to question any invitation to speak on a panel that is made up entirely of white men. white men concerned about peace and justice should make a commitment to advocate for the inclusion of women's voices and men of other ethnic and racial backgrounds in their professional speaking and writing careers. Like all people, white men are not objective or neutral. We are all subjective. White men's perspectives are valid and real. But because of society's structures, white men's experiences are different from others. Some of us have institutional power and others do not. So a further strategy for addressing Yoder's impact is to make a commitment that any edited book, conference, or panel about Yoder will include the voices of women, including those named at the beginning of this chapter, who write critically on Yoder's negative impact on pacifist women in the church.

This afterword is just the beginnings of a map for future generations of pacifist theologians to bring together orthodoxy (right belief) with orthopraxy (right action). Addressing Yoder's violence is only a part of this peacebuilding process. Our larger task is to ensure that the radical message in some of Yoder's writings gets translated into radical acts of inclusion of other voices on pacifist theology so eloquently articulated in this book.

Passing the pacifist torch requires that the church itself, and those leading pacifist theology, listen to the voices of those not in power.

NOTES

1. See Stutzman, "John Howard Yoder discernment Group."

2. See for example Heggen, Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes.

3. Krall, Elephants in God's Living Room, 370.

4. Yoder, "Chapter 5: with and Beyond Girard."

5. Krall, Elephants in God's Living Room, 14.

6. Yoder, "Chapter 5: with and Beyond Girard," italics added. an adaptation of this quote can also be found in Yoder, "You have It Coming," 183. however, in the published version, the editor, John C. nugent, removed the three italicized words from Yoder's original text.

7. Dr. Krall holds an MS in psychiatric-community mental health nursing and a doctorate in theology and personality. In addition, she taught peace studies at Goshen College for eighteen years.

11. Krall, Elephants in God's Living Room, 20. 388

12. Ibid.,10–11.

13. This information comes from an e-mail exchange with one of the women who experienced aggressive sexual behavior from Yoder.

15. See Zehr, Changing Lenses.

16. Krall, Elephants in God's Living Room, 109.

17. Ibid.,150.

18. See chapter 2, “Sixteenth-Century anabaptist roots.”

19. Krall, Elephants in God’s Living Room, 61.

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14 comments

AUDREY says:
Mar 5, 2015

Reply

A questioning flag goes up when I read the sentence “These are acts of domination that tore at the dignity of the brilliant and potentially powerful women Yoder deliberately chose to violate”. The crime of sexual abuse is not worse because of the level of intelligence or influential power of the victims. There is as much loss of dignity and personal security and permanent pain for ANY person of ANY level of education and/or power.

BARBRA GRABER says:
Mar 6, 2015

Reply

I very much appreciate your sentiments here, Audrey. I think the most important take-away from what Lisa is saying is that Yoder consciously or unconsciously chose, for the most part, female targets who were the most brilliant, gifted, and promising new leaders for our generation of Mennonites. One might assume it was for the explicit and familiar purpose of “putting them in their place.” By assaulting them sexually he knocked them off their center, out of what was becoming for them a very successful game, and drove many of them from the church. This fact makes his crimes even more malicious and tragic in my opinion. I just heard last week from a Yoder victim who shared that at the time of Yoder’s assault, when she was in her early 20’s, her deepest wish was to become a Mennonite pastor. His action not only made her calling impossible, it created in her a trust-gap that has kept her from being able to truly enjoy church and the special nurture of congregational life ever again. This is a very common experience for those of us who were abused by church leaders or abused from within a church context. We hang on the fringes, never quite knowing if it is safe to go into the water again. In addition to his choice of victims, Yoder used the intellectual and professional ambitions of these already powerful young women to groom them. He feigned interest in their scholarly work, gained their trust as someone who could help them succeed, then when they least expected it, suddenly and aggressively sexualized the relationship and violated their dignity in the most disgusting ways imaginable. It’s an old trick powerful men have used for centuries. Bill Cosby used it extremely well with hopeful models and actresses. Yoder used it with aspiring young women pastors

and theologians. All this to say the “brilliant and powerful” piece Lisa references is important in painting the overall landscape of Yoder’s crimes against women.

RON ADAMS says:
Mar 5, 2015

Thanks to Lisa for writing this, and to this website for making it available here. I am grateful for the truth-telling being done by both of you.

Reply

LISA SCHIRCH says:
Mar 5, 2015

Yes, I agree completely with you, Audrey. For whatever reason, Yoder’s victims were mostly women leaders or scholars in the church. I simply note the pattern. But I certainly do not mean to convey that sexual abuse is somehow less serious if the women had not been in leadership positions.

Reply

AUDREY says:
Mar 6, 2015

“Yoder’s victims were mostly women leaders or scholars…” I’m curious, Lisa – do we know if he perceived any male leaders or scholars as threats to him? How did he treat men who were his peers – particularly, men who were successful in the same field as he?

Reply

LISA SCHIRCH says:
Mar 6, 2015

Hi Audrey, I’m not the one best placed to answer that, though I have heard many refer to him as a bully in regards to his relationships with men. For example, in the article on Mennonite World Review by Richard Kauffman on Yoder, Kauffman says Yoder was a bully to some of his male colleagues.
http://mennoworld.org/2015/03/02/latest-issue/opinion-mistakes-regrets-lessons/#comment-1634

Reply

RUTH KRALL says:
Mar 23, 2015

There are hints and clues but no one has written publicly other than to remark that John was seen as a bully.

Ross Bender, the younger, has published some correspondence with seminary faculty and other members of the Mennonite academy. These private reminiscences reveal John’s collegial style to have been abrasive. A very well known Mennonite leader many years ago compared efforts to have a collegial conversation with John as *pissing with skunks* . People love to tell the story of John confronting one of his dissertation advisors – Karl Barth – with a critical manuscript about Barth’s theology when he handed in his dissertation. Barth is supposed to comment later that *were so bellicose* – apparently in reference to John. In the classroom he was pugnacious. He would castigate students who *asked the wrong questions* of the material being taught/studied. But, I worked with John on several committees in the 1980’s and he knew how to be collegial. In addition, I have consistently heard that the European Mennonites deeply appreciated his presence and his work among them after World War Two. Mennonite historian Al Keim wrote a biography of H. S. Bender and he devoted several pages to Bender’s and Yoder’s troubled relationship from John’s earliest college days through the CONCERN movement era when John and a small group of colleagues were urging Mennonite Church reforms in the area of ecclesiology. So, I don’t think there is any one answer to your question. He could, apparently be very patient with ROTC students at Notre Dame and very impatient with Mennonite students at AMBS and Notre dame. I think it is imperative for those of us who are Mennonites to do several things simultaneously: (1) refuse to close the topic down for women and men who feel victimized by Yoder; (2) to refuse to demonize Yoder; (3) to refuse to demonize church leaders even as we must seek to hold the whole denomination accountable for its managerial failures; (4) begin to examine ways in which our history as a people and our theologies as a people have contributed to this mess. As someone who is now in my 70’s, I don’t think my generation can do this work. I also don’t think people in their late 50’s and 60’s can do this work. The future church – now already here – must return to this issue as a *morality play* or as a *precautionary tale* . Yoder has never been an only in terms of religious leader sexual abuse. Most stories go untold although they circulate in the underground of Mennonite Church gossip, rumor, and innuendo. It is time for all of us to start telling the truth about these matters.

ANN & PAUL YODER says:
Mar 5, 2015

Reply

Brilliant, bold, and balanced analysis that offers specific steps for the JHY tragedy to be transformed into “a Teachable Moment”, a game-changer for the Church’s future generation of peace & justice makers. You offer hope and a way forward. Thank you, Lisa!

TIM NAFZIGER says:
Mar 5, 2015

Reply

Lisa,

Thanks for this powerful piece of analysis and visioning. Your work in this piece is crucial in the imaginative work that need to do to rebuild and strengthen the conversation between the Anabaptist, peacemaking and feminist communities. Thank you for this gift.

CAROL STEINER says:
Mar 8, 2015

Reply

I am deeply disappointed in the Mennonite church. I came to a Mennonite congregation from another denomination. Part of what I needed to deal with was sexual abuse by a pastor and I found much in pacifism helpful. I received support and appropriate counsel for dealing with the sexual abuse. The lack of acceptance and support for the women who were abused by Yoder has been a major disappointment. I wonder if the Mennonite church understands the cost of not dealing with the sexual abuse of women by Yoder or the sexual abuse of women in their congregations.

BARBRA GRABER says:
Mar 8, 2015

Reply

Thank you for sharing your thoughts here, Carol and for engaging with our website and Lisa’s article. We share your disappointment but believe now more than ever there is great hope for the Mennonite Church. That’s why we put our energies into provoking conversation, sharing experiences, exposing predators, and working to prevent what happened to us from happening to others in our church. Should you ever choose to tell your own story of pastoral abuse for the education of others and your own further empowerment, don’t hesitate to contact us. BG

LISA SCHIRCH says:
Mar 9, 2015

Reply

I am really grateful too for Our Stories Untold to have published this piece and also for the comments and discussion here on the comments section. Our voices are in the minority. Sometimes I find it hard to not focus on the negative notes that people send me instead of these positive notes of encouragement. I’m glad for the encouragement and hope others to see Our Stories Untold as a place where we can encourage each other to speak out. Thank you…

JANET ESCH says:
Mar 10, 2015

Reply

Thank you to Lisa Schirch for the confrontative Afterword. It is chilling to hear of the cowardice of Mennonite Church USA leadership. I am a graduate of Eastern Mennonite College/University and have long left the Mennonite Church, but have firmly supported the Center for Justice & Peacebuilding and the belief in pacifism. I wonder if the same climate of cowardice required EMU to avoid change concerning the possibility of committed union among members of the LGBTQ community. I remember when the church allowed divorced people to be members of the church as long as they did not remarry. Such inconsistency seems to be constant in church dogma that keeps many of us away. Too complicated.

AUDREY METZ says:
Mar 11, 2015

Reply

As a divorced and remarried person – and still Mennonite – I am really tired of hearing how we once considered divorce and remarriage a sin and now we have accepted those people – GASP! HOW MAGNANIMOUS WE ALL ARE for being willing to do THAT! I believe, when that attitude is expressed – which is nothing less than pointing fingers at a different area of (former as well as current) discrimination – especially by those who are trying to be accepted/welcomed/loved for who they are – it is at best insensitive, at worst discriminatory and, therefore, hypocritical to say they believe others are not as accepting as they. To me, that sounds like nobody but the most traditional haven’t really been accepted YET. People still think of us (divorced, remarried) as something to be watched, if not shunned (with Christian charity, of course). When did it become more loving and accepting to point fingers at anybody? It’s still being done to us, in addition to other groups “on the edges”. Accepting LGBTQs is not the only important issue in the Mennonite church, nor has it ever been. Many others from any direction from “the edges” have battled discrimination, judgement, even disdain. We waited and struggled to be recognized as God’s Beloved. In many Mennonite churches, we won that struggle. It will happen with LGBTQs. I have no doubt about that. Our prayers will be answered. And maybe, one day, we’ll all look at each other WITHOUT saying – with great pride, it would seem – that we can be proud of ourselves that we actually accepted “these people” into our churches. One day, I hope, we can be grateful that we are all welcomed to the table – without labeling one group more important than the other. Maybe, one

day, we can recognize that it's a miracle that ANY of us is "accepted in the Beloved" and therefore, welcome at the table – without pointing fingers at ANY of "those people" who were/are more unacceptable than any of the other truly hungry sinners at the table!

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