

John Howard Yoder's Political Jesus

John Dear | Oct. 18, 2011 On the Road to Peace

One of my earliest teachers of Jesus' nonviolence was the great Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

I remember discovering in the fall of 1982 his seminal work, *The Politics of Jesus*, and devouring it. There I found for the first time someone who integrated my passion for Gandhian nonviolence with my devotion and discipleship to Jesus. Yoder answered all my questions. He outlined a theological way to understand the Gospel that made sense.

In the early 1990s, I met Yoder when he visited the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., where I was living and studying at the time. He was quiet, reserved and serious -- and as brilliant as I expected. He continued to teach the nonviolence of Jesus until his death in 1997.

Orbis Books has just published an excellent anthology of his works called *John Howard Yoder: Spiritual Writings* (edited by Paul Martens and Jenny Howell). Yoder has been called "one of the most passionate, eloquent and effective exponents of Christian nonviolence in the late twentieth century." This new collection makes that clear. His writing broke new ground and led to many new insights into the Gospel. He sowed the seeds for a theology and spirituality of peace and nonviolence that I hope will one day be widely embraced. I urge everyone interested in Christian nonviolence to read this book and study Yoder's wisdom. We're all indebted to him.

In their introduction, the editors tell of Yoder's life. Born to a modest Ohio Mennonite family in 1927, Yoder traveled in 1949 to war-torn France with a church service program to help provide basic services to those in need. After his return, he married his wife, Anne; eventually they had seven children. An active member of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Yoder became connected with many Christian peacemakers. His teaching career began at Goshen Biblical Seminary and led him to Notre Dame in 1977, where he taught until his death in 1997. Although he traveled the world giving scholarly lectures on ethics and scripture, he spent most of his life teaching and writing books.

His masterpiece, *The Politics of Jesus*, appeared in 1972.

"Yoder provided a coherent and compelling account of a political Jesus," the editors write, "a Jesus actually tempted by the Zealot option yet also a Messiah whose very suffering and death on the cross constituted a political act in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of this world, a Jesus whose kingdom was not some transcendent reality beyond this life, a Jesus who demanded imitation in the form of replacing dominion with servanthood and hostility with forgiveness."

Best known for his theological ethics, Yoder taught a communal vision of the church rooted in the life and teachings of the nonviolent Jesus, the editors write in their introduction.

For Yoder, one is not asked to believe in Jesus but to follow and participate in the life of Jesus (as if, in some way, belief could be separated from following).

Because Christ died on the cross, patiently allowing others to choose evil over obedience, so too Christians are called to follow Christ in nonviolence.

Yoder bravely writes: "The cross of Jesus is the extreme demonstration that agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice, and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience. In short, Christians are to live and love like Jesus, (and) know that in spite of the way things appear, God's purposes will prevail with the coming of God's kingdom: the resurrection of Jesus is proof that love cannot be conquered even if evil does its worst. With this assurance, Christians do not need to seek control, to make things come out right."

Yoder lived a quiet, scholarly life that directly influenced our nation's leading theologian, Stanley Hauerwas. But I wonder what influence Thomas Merton and the Berrigans had on Yoder. He was one of the rare few Merton invited to attend a small retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1964. Along with the Berrigans, A.J. Muste, Jim Forest and others, Yoder spent several days discussing the Christian roots of peacemaking. That retreat changed the lives of each participant. Maybe it spurred Yoder to write *The Politics of Jesus*.

This new anthology offers insights into ethics, community, church, history, national identity, the just war theory and hope. But three themes stand out for me: Yoder's teachings on nonviolence, Jesus and the cross.

"Before it is a social strategy, nonviolence is a moral commitment," Yoder writes. "Before it is a moral commitment, it is a distinctive spirituality. It presupposes and fosters a distinct way of seeing oneself and one's neighbor under God. That 'way of seeing' is more like prayer than it is like a shrewd social strategy, although it is both. It is more a faith than a theory, although it is both."

It was rare then and it's rare now to hear theologians espouse the wisdom of nonviolence. But Yoder understood it well. He tried to explore its spiritual roots.

"Nonviolent action is costly," he wrote. "It includes readiness at least for prison and a degree of risk of loss of life. (The willingness to take this risk) can only be rooted in a religious vision of the congruence between suffering and the purposes of God."

His writings on Jesus were original and visionary. He was one of the first to study Gandhi and King and read the Gospel through their eyes. Yoder's insights sound obvious now, but at the time, they were unheard of.

"The first thing to say about the biblical picture is that Jesus is a public figure," he writes. "He uses political language. The authorities perceive him as a political threat and put him to death because of it. The legal basis for his crucifixion in the Roman record books was the charge that he was an insurrectionist."

Few theologians write so explicitly about the political threat of Jesus and what that means for his followers. Here are other excerpts:

- "Jesus gave (his followers) a new way of life to live. He gave them a new way to deal with offenders -- by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence -- by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money -- by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership -- by drawing upon the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society -- by building a new order, not smashing the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman, parent and child, master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the 'enemy nation.'"

- "At the heart of the Christian faith properly understood is not dogma or ritual, but Jesus. At the heart of the meaning of Jesus is his teaching of the kingdom of God. At the heart of that teaching is the Sermon on the Mount. At the heart of the Sermon is the contrast between what had been said by them of old and what 'I now say to you.' At the core of these antitheses is the love of the enemy and nonresistance to evil. The result is what Tolstoy calls simply the 'key' to the scripture message: the cure for evil is suffering. Not only is this one dramatic and scandalous teaching of Jesus internally accredited as the key to the scriptures, it is also the key to what is wrong with the world."
- "What is wrong with the world is most fundamentally that people respond to evil with evil and thereby aggravate the spiral of violence. The key to the good news is that we are freed from prolonging the chain of evil causes engendering evil effects by action and reaction in kind. By refusing to extend the chain of vengeance, we break into the world with good news. This one key opened the door to a restructuring of the entire universe of Christian life and thought."
- "Jesus is saying (in Matt. 5:44-48) that we should not love only our friends because God did not love only his friends. We are asked to 'resemble God' just at this one point: not in his omnipotence or his eternity or his impeccability, but simply in the indiscriminating or unconditional character of God's love. This is not a fruit of long growth and maturation; it is not inconceivable or impossible. We can do it tomorrow if we believe. We can stop loving only the lovable, lending only to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionality of the benevolence of God."
- "This is one of the keys to the problem of war and legitimate defense. Every argument that would permit the taking of life is in one way or another based on calculations of rights and merits. I prefer the life of those nearest me to that of the foreigner, or the life of the innocent to that of the trouble-maker, because my love is conditional, qualified, natural, just like that of everyone else. Jesus does not condemn this normal, self-seeking quality -- for Gentiles, but he says there is nothing new, nothing special, nothing redemptive or healing about it. 'What reward can you expect?' Not only is 'perfect love' not limited to those who merit it; it goes beyond the unjust demands of those who coerce compliance with their will. 'Do not (violently) resist one who does evil.' The alternative is creative concern for the person who is bent on evil, coupled with the refusal of his goals."

Because Yoder put together the practice of nonviolence with the life of Jesus, it is no wonder that much of his writing is focused on the meaning of the cross, and these reflections are unmatched. Forty years later, he still has much to teach of about the way of the cross. For example:

- "The believer's cross is no longer any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded. The believer's cross is, like that of Jesus, the price of social nonconformity. It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering. It is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost? The cross of Christ was not an inexplicable or chance event that happened to strike him, like illness or accident. To accept the cross as his destiny, to move toward it and even to provoke it, when he could well have done otherwise, was Jesus' constantly reiterated free choice. The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt, or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally-to-be-expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society."
- "Christ is agape; self-giving, nonresistant love. At the cross, this nonresistance, including the refusal to use political means of self defense, found its ultimate revelation in the uncomplaining and forgiving death of the innocent at the hands of the guilty. This death reveals how God deals with evil; here is the only valid starting point for Christian pacifism or nonresistance. The cross is the extreme demonstration that

agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience. But the cross is not defeat. Christ's obedience unto death was crowned by the miracle of the resurrection and the exaltation at the right hand of God."

John Howard Yoder deserves to be widely read, and this book is a good place to start. I hope all Catholic and Christian peace and justice activists will join me in studying Yoder's work to gain new insights into the nonviolence of Jesus and our own Gospel nonviolence.

John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, is available from Amazon.com [1]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour to discuss this Gospel confrontation of the God of life and peace against the culture of death and war. To host John for an evening talk, send an email through [his website](#) [2]. His other recent books, including [Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings](#) [3]; [Put Down Your Sword](#) [4] and [A Persistent Peace](#) [5], are also available from Amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn [6]. For more information, go to [John Dear's website](#) [2].

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