

**“Thank God, It (Never Should Have) Happened”:
Historiography and Theology in John Howard Yoder and Herbert Butterfield**

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Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy (2011)

“Christians from the beginning have a strong investment in history as a discipline which seeks to hold together in one story continuity and discontinuity. That is the nature of their story, with its unexpected fulfillments of prophecy, its crucified God. Christians are people (just like the Jews after the exile) for whom the past has become a problem, a challenge, to be talked about, talked through, mended and unified in language. The strange and interruptive has to be made into a unity, has to be made intelligible, yet not reduced and made so smooth that you don’t notice there is a problem. The action of God is allowed to appear in the telling of such a story as that which holds together apparent contradictions and drives us to deeper levels of consistency”

-- Rowan Williams¹

Preface

In 2009, Baptists commemorated the four hundredth anniversary of our movement. What is the theologically appropriate way to observe such an anniversary? What was the proper posture to take on this particular occasion? Such historical milestones are appropriate opportunities for introspection and the asking of questions that might not otherwise be raised: In light of Christ’s own prayer for his followers’ unity, is it an unqualified good that Baptists as a distinct Christian movement have lasted this long and grown this large? Was the emergence of Baptists in the stream of church history a glorious restoration, a colossal mistake, a tragic necessity, or a morally ambiguous accident? Finally,

¹ *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 9.

ought we hope that Baptists will be around in another four centuries (should the Lord tarry, of course)?

Besides sounding absurd or scandalous to many Baptist ears, such questions should not be asked or answered hastily. Yet, for good or ill, they are live questions at a time when the kind of denominational existence characteristic of Western modernity is being unsettled.

To inquire into *how* and *what* we ought to remember as we ponder our present identity and our responsibility for the future is to enter a realm where the “historical” and “theological” are deeply intertwined. In what follows, my goal is to make a critical comparison of the writings of a theologian (John Howard Yoder) and a historian (Herbert Butterfield) with some interesting affinities in order to make a case for raising these kinds of existential questions and to lay some groundwork for addressing them. I will not be addressing particular questions about Baptist historical and theological identity directly in the main text, though I will return to these matters for some general comments in the conclusion (or postscript).

Introduction: Why Yoder?

Self-described postliberal Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs argues that John Howard Yoder’s entire theological project should be of interest to Jews as well as Christians. This is because the Christian vision this American Mennonite

theologian articulated is that of a “biblical religion after.”² That is, just as Jews have repeatedly faced the task of faithfully reshaping an historic faith rooted in scripture in response to dramatically new historical circumstances and ruptures (exile, diaspora, Western secularism, the *Shoah*), so Yoder spent his scholarly career advancing a account of Christian existence he hoped would enable the churches to find renewed opportunities for faithful corporate witness and discipleship *after* the demise of their social and cultural dominance in the West.

Interest in Yoder’s work has only increased since his death in 1999.³ Since a concern for reading history rightly featured prominently in his writings, interpreters have sought to find the best conceptual key for unlocking Yoder’s hermeneutic of history using categories such as “eschatology” and “apocalyptic.” Equally prominent, however, are Yoder’s attempts to revisit particular historical moments, drawing upon relevant sources to challenge familiar accounts of how the past turned into the present. In other words, he tried to do history just as much as he inquired after its meaning.

This paper examines Yoder as historian and theologian by putting his work in conversation with that of Herbert Butterfield, professor of History at Peterhouse College, Cambridge for the middle third of the twentieth century. Best known for his critique of what he called the “Whig Interpretation of

² Peter Ochs, “Yoder’s Witness to the People Israel,” in John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 2.

³ Major presses continue to release some of Yoder’s previously unpublished writings, and a number of edited volumes dedicated to his thought have appeared, most recently *The New Yoder*, Chris Huebner and Peter Dula eds., (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2010).

History,” Butterfield was also something of an amateur theologian. A Methodist layman who quietly served as a supply preacher for local congregations throughout his years as a Cambridge don, in the later years of his career he began to explore more explicitly the relationship between “history,” the historian, and Christian faith.

At a general level, Butterfield’s writings give us an important perspective on Yoder’s entire theological project. For instance, there are interesting similarities between Butterfield’s critique of whig historiography and aspects of Yoder’s well-known polemic against “Constantinianism.” More importantly, Butterfield’s work contributes a distinctively historiographical (though not a-theological) voice to critical engagement with Yoder’s legacy.

As will be seen, those points at which the otherwise highly compatible Yoder and Butterfield part ways have little to do with familiar contrasts between mere description and subjective interpretation, empirical history and abstract theologizing. Rather, they can be traced to classic debates within the Christian tradition over the relationship between human and divine freedom. Such a broad statement will make more sense after saying more about what it means to consider Yoder as historian, and after looking at Yoder’s attempt to wrestle with the historical and theological problematic of Christian supercessionism.

Yoder and “History”

In the preface to the first edition of his most famous work, *The Politics of*

Jesus (1972), Yoder argued that it is possible to find “a bulk of specific and concrete content in Jesus’ vision of the divine order which can speak to our age as it seldom has been free to do before, if it can be unleashed from the bonds of inappropriate *a priori*.”⁴ The realm of this specific and concrete content is--to put it simply--“history.” Thus, in *Politics*, Yoder drew upon recent historical investigations of first-century Palestine and Second Temple Judaism in order to challenge mainstream assumptions about what Jesus taught and embodied vis-à-vis concrete social and political matters.

In Yoder’s articulation of this historical level of *The Politics of Jesus* we can discern three significant claims. These are claims about how history should be done (“unleashed from the bonds of inappropriate *a priori*”), why it should be done (it “can speak to our age”), and why it should be done *now* (“as it seldom has been free to do before”). Roughly speaking, we can say that the first contention deals with how good historical work should be done; the second with the general utility of such work; and the third says something about the relationship between (a particular reading of) the present and (a particular account of) the past. Though these dimensions are difficult to discuss separately, this schema provides a way to sketch the relationship between some of Yoder’s most prominently displayed historiographical and theological concerns, particularly as we turn to his attempt to re-envision the “Jewish-Christian schism.”

⁴ Ibid.

Unleashing History: “It Did not Have to Be”

Yoder once described himself as an “amateur,” which he considered to be the natural role of a participant in interdisciplinary conversation. While his assertion of amateur status might sound like false scholarly humility, it entailed a specific stance toward his subject matter and his interlocutors. For Yoder, while the “expert . . . shares her or his colleagues’ axioms,” the amateur, like himself, “asks why they have become axiomatic.”⁵

Working in this amateurish mode, Yoder challenged the assumption that history is best understood as the attempt to confirm why all the things that have happened, happened. Why was there an American Civil War? Why are there Christians called Methodists? How can we account for the rise of the German Third Reich? Historical answers to these questions may attribute major developments to a few straightforward causes; or they can weave a rich tapestry in which multiple factors intersect in complex ways. In either case, the goal remains the same: “good history” gives a satisfying and illuminating explanation of *how* a particular part of the past moved toward our present, using generally accepted sources and methods.

While hastily conceding that it is much better to have good historical explanations of this sort than not, Yoder insisted that “there is no error more natural, and perhaps there are few errors more damaging in the reading of

⁵ *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. 46.

history, than the assumption that events had to go the way they did.”⁶ As he saw it, an unreflective sense of inevitability is so damaging because, in a subtle and ultimately unhistorical manner, it denies the moral agency of particular actors, thereby denying something fundamental about the past:

[T]he living of human history matters because moral choices are not only real but important; they make a difference for how the world is to go and what is to happen to our neighbors. Therefore the writing of history, *when rightly done*, ought to somehow render the decisiveness of the choices people make. Yet often the historian puts a premium on being able to lay over events the grid of an explanatory cause/effect connectedness such that things really had to go the way they finally did. The more convincingly the historian can demonstrate that necessity, the better she/he believes the job has been done.⁷

For Yoder, history “rightly done” skillfully describes the multiple options, pressures, and uncertainty with which people and groups in a particular moment were dealing as they weighed their responsibility for the future.

While agreeing that better history can challenge the assumption that specific conflicts were unavoidable, Yoder distinguished between instinctual revisionist reactions to mainstream history by pacifists (and others) and a deeper and broader concern for the past in its integrity.⁸ Without advancing a rigorously argued case for the epistemological possibility or superiority of “good” or “responsible” history, he insisted on a kind of historical realism in which there

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Yoder, “The Burden and Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism” in Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke eds., *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace* (North Newton, KS: Pandora Press, 1994), 22.

⁸ “Love of enemy must include love of the intellectual adversary, including intellectual respect for the holders of the positions one must in conscience reject. . . . It cannot or should not be argued that *any old* revisionism is better than tradition, or that rebellion is in itself always morally imperative.” (Yoder, “Evangelical Revisionism,” 20-21).

are things we can know about the past that resist our present-minded interests, if we are willing to seek them. For Yoder, history cannot simply be a weapon employed in contrarian fashion against any versions of the status quo. Such destructive willfulness occludes the historian's vision just as much as mainstream histories that assume things had to go the way they did. He contended that there is a methodological non-violence required of the historian--*especially* the Christian historian--and that such forbearance enables an encounter with something true about the past and potentially accessible to all.

To amend the damage done by history suffused with a sense of the past's predetermined character, Yoder urged the adoption of an "indispensable corrective emphasis concerning historical method" which works from the axiomatic assumption, "it did not have to be."⁹ One can see a concern to show that certain things "did not have to be" from the very beginning of his career. His doctoral research focused on the series of formal disputations held for more than a decade, starting in the late 1520s, between representatives of what would become the (city-)state-sponsored Reformed churches and eventual leaders of the persecuted Swiss Anabaptist communities.¹⁰

Drawing upon copious primary-source research, Yoder stressed that figures like the "Reformed" Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Bucer on the one hand and the "Anabaptists" Menno Simons and Michael Sattler on the other were

⁹ Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 43.

¹⁰ The dissertation has been published in English as *Anabaptism and Reformation In Switzerland*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder, trans. David Carl Stassen and C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2004).

unaware “that the switches had already been set long before, whereby abstractions like ‘inclusivism’ or ‘state church’ were going to dictate fatalistically the course of events.”¹¹ By contrast, he insisted, there is plenty of evidence that neither side believed or wanted to accept that schism was inevitable. Instead, members of all parties continued to hope for unity well after what historians generally consider to have been the all-important turning point, the first articulation of what are now seen as incompatible sets of principles. For Yoder, perceptive accounts of the Swiss Reformation will show that, despite the presence of differing conceptions of what disciplined Christian community entailed, many believed for quite some time that a fateful choice between the communities later known as Anabaptist and Reformed did not have to be.

This kind of history calls into question the necessity of the present. In the process, it destabilizes contemporary identities and the narratives on which they rely (“if things could have gone otherwise then, perhaps *we* can be different than we understand ourselves to be now”). This is in the broadest sense what Yoder meant by freeing the past from unnecessary assumptions so that it may “speak to our age.” His doctoral research enabled him to challenge the notion that his own tradition was essentially sectarian and unconcerned with Christian unity.¹² In a

¹¹ Yoder, “Evangelical Revisionism,” 25.

¹² Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1958). In the judgment of Mark Thiessen Nation, “[o]ne could argue that . . . Yoder’s entire academic career was committed to communicating in broadly Christian terms what he learned through his studies of sixteenth-century Anabaptism in the 1950s in Europe. It was through those studies that he came to the central convictions that he would subsequently spend a lifetime articulating” (*John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic*

similar project, of interest to a much larger audience, Yoder hoped to renew the church's discipleship by pressing the claim that a decisive parting of the ways between church and synagogue "did not have to be."

Letting History "Speak": *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*

A series of Yoder's essays entitled *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* was posthumously published in 2004. Yoder introduced the essays, written over the course of his career, by observing that most attempts at Jewish-Christian dialogue tend to take place among or between individuals located within the liberal wings of their respective communities. Thus, tradition-minded Jews and Christians often perceive such dialogues as yet another means by which assimilationist, cosmopolitan elements hope to pull their respective communities further away from their inherited convictions. For his part, Yoder argued that any breakthrough in Jewish-Christian relations could only come, not from a disavowal of the past ("the differences we need to take stock of are too fundamental to be 'outgrown' by merely regretting that someone once took them too seriously"¹³), but from a responsible re-envisioning of the past and, in light of this, a renewed posing of the question of whether it was theologically necessary that the schism occurred in the way it ultimately did.

To begin, Yoder laid out the plain-sense understanding of the "schism." The standard account presupposes the existence of two mutually exclusive social

Convictions [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 31).

¹³ Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 46.

and doctrinal/ritual systems called "Judaism" and "Christianity." With the long history of Jewish-Christian division and animosity in the West firmly fixed in one's memory, it is assumed that--like oil and water--it was only a matter of time until these fundamentally incompatible substances would separate. This background narrative incorporates several implicit assumptions: first, there was such a thing as normative Judaism in the first centuries of the Common or Christian Era, with recognized authorities and clear boundaries; second, Jesus (and, later, Saul/Paul) categorically rejected this normative Judaism, and "Judaism" returned the compliment; and, finally, the combination of these two breaks clarified the essential nature of "Christianity."

To all this, Yoder responded by saying that there was no single event anyone can point to and call *the* Jewish-Christian schism. Employing the "indispensable corrective concerning historical method," he provided evidence that there was a significant time period (half a century at the very least, though likely much longer), during which many "Jews" and "Christians" (to use the anachronistic terms) would have agreed that a decisive parting of the ways did not have to be. Yoder insisted that the reading of contemporary assumptions about Jews and Christians into accounts of an earlier time either ignores or treats as insignificant persuasive evidence showing that, for the space of a few generations, "it was completely possible, subject to no necessary disciplinary measures, according to the best traditions of both communions, for the same Jew to be both 'rabbinic' and 'messianic' (or, in later anachronistic terms, both a 'Jew'

and a 'Christian')."¹⁴ The critical point for Yoder is that confession of faith in Jesus did not serve immediately as the catalyst for a parting of the ways. Instead, he pinned most of the blame for disrupting the fragile but real state of fluidity between "Judaism" and "Christianity" on second-century Christian apologists like Justin Martyr. By Yoder's reading, the apologists stressed the discontinuity between synagogue and church in a distinctively new way in order to gain a wider hearing, and that it was only with these efforts that, from the Christian side, schism with the Jews is given a specifically doctrinal basis.¹⁵

For our purposes, there are several important points to draw from Yoder's attempt to let a re-visioned history speak to the contemporary question of Jewish-Christian relations. First is his refinement of the "inappropriate *a prioris*" from which history must be freed if we are to hear what it can say. According to Yoder, historians need to bring to bear upon their subject matter the same skills of critical awareness that are developed through responsible participation in any significant dialogue. These skills include sensitivity to the reality that seemingly contradictory ideas are often held together within flesh-and-blood people and communities, as well as an ability to recognize that certain kinds of conflict and

¹⁴ Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 54. To save space, I have removed a summary of Yoder's supporting evidence and interpretation. In a recent lecture series, Peter Ochs updated the general scholarly consensus as regards Yoder's historical claims and concluded that Yoder over-reaches on some of his assertions (e.g., his claim that a vital "missionary impulse" was present in Rabbinic Judaism and only abandoned after the break with the Christians). However, as Ochs grants, Yoder did not need a strong version of his historical claims to be validated for his fairly circumscribed theological point to stand. (The lectures have been published as *The Free Church and Israel's Covenant* [Winnipeg: Central Mennonite University Press, 2010]. Copies are at present very difficult to obtain, so I can only refer to a draft manuscript.)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

tension may actually be constitutive of community:

Intellectual historians are especially prone to sniff out necessary divisions where only paradox, or inconsistency, or tolerable diversity, inconclusive debate, or amusing variety really existed. The rabbis were especially skilled at managing contradictory views within the one social process. The fact that people argue against one another does not prove that they are in incompatible movements: it may prove just the opposite.¹⁶

At this point, Yoder was emphasizing what needs to be done to let history “speak.” What can most immediately be gained from such listening is negative: “it did *not* have to be.”

Clearly, however, this negative conclusion opens the way for a positive, if tentative, theological claim: what did not have to be then (according to many of the participants) may not have to continue now. Yoder knew that his reading of the available sources was not particularly controversial within the historical guild. But this new portrait of the (so-called) schism had yet to influence traditional Jews and Christians who associate challenges to the received history with unacceptable doctrinal revisionism or relativism. In response to such concerns, Yoder argued that even the slightest historical precedent for a permeable border between “Judaism” and “Christianity” means that it cannot be ruled out as a contemporary option on theological grounds.¹⁷ Yet even this affirmation remains provisional. In this case, “history” --disciplined to avoid imposing a determinism drawn from present assumptions--opens the door to a dialogue that no longer presumes to know the essential nature of the relationship

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷ Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 53.

between the interlocutors. Reflecting this ambiguity, Yoder suggested that Christians should begin referring to Judaism as a “non-non-Christian” religion.¹⁸

Finally, however, Yoder wanted to say more than this, and it is here that his claims become more controversial. In addition to giving reasons for why the schism was not inevitable, and in addition to his claim that revisiting the past opens up new possibilities for contemporary Jews and Christians, Yoder went further to argue that the schism *should* not have been and to describe what should have happened instead. His insistence that the Jewish-Christian schism did not have to be is related to his call in *The Politics of Jesus* for letting the concrete history of Jesus’ life and teachings speak “as it has seldom been free to do so before.” Behind both claims lies Yoder’s understanding of the shape of church history and salvation history more generally.

Jeremianic Judaism and Constantinian Christianity

Throughout his writings, Yoder claimed that “Constantinianism” was the besetting sin of mainline Western Christianity. Yet in *The Jewish-Christian Schism*, Yoder came closest to pinpointing a precise moment for a catastrophic fall of the historic church--not in the fourth century, but perhaps as early as the second, when “Christianity” began to turn its back on the Jews. Yoder saw the eventual rejection of historic Israel as a decisive step leading the church away from its original commitment to Jesus’ radically *Jewish* ethic, a move that would be

¹⁸ Ibid., 147-156.

reinforced by the thoroughgoing transformation of the Church by the Constantinian establishment.

The upshot of this claim for Yoder is that Jews within Christendom provided a living example of the kind of community Jesus intended for his followers. To convey the sharpness of his claims, I quote him at length:

Judaism within Christendom since Constantine has the *shape* which historians will later call 'radical reformation' or 'peace church.' Jews expect and accept minority status. They deny ultimate loyalty to any local nation or regime, which is what war presupposes, while they provisionally accept its administration. They look on past and present righteous violence and religious nationalism, including that of their own ancient history, as mistaken. It is evident how this *sociological* distance from the Christendom synthesis frees one for pacifist moral insight.

. . . . For two millennia Judaism has lived its ages of toleration and its ages of renewed exile or even martyrdom, sometimes within and sometimes outside the 'Christian' empires of East and West, but they have never reached for the sword. . . . Occasionally privileged after the model of Joseph, more often emigrating, frequently suffering martyrdom non-violently, they were able to maintain identity without turf or sword, community without sovereignty. They thereby demonstrated pragmatically the viability of the ethic of Jeremiah and Jesus.

In sum: for over a millennium the Jews of the Diaspora were the closest thing to the ethic of Jesus existing on any significant scale anywhere in Christendom.¹⁹

From Yoder's "radically catholic" perspective, while diasporic Jews inhabited something approaching the kinds of communities Jesus had hoped for, a de-Judaized Christianity increasingly became "an a-historical moral monotheism with no particular peoplehood and no defences [sic] against acculturation."²⁰

¹⁹ Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *ibid.*, 81-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

In the end, Yoder did not simply claim that the Jewish-Christian schism did not have to be. He went further to insist that what *should have been* was a kind of free-church/peace-church Judeo-Christianity. This is not quite counter-factual speculation (“if only Justin Martyr and his ilk had not tried to de-Judaize the church, it *would never have* accepted Caesar’s bargain . . .”), but it is close. What has proved most controversial is the polemical thrust of Yoder’s theological claim that the schism, and *what followed in its wake*, never should have happened.

In the published edition of *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, a brief critical response from Peter Ochs follows each of Yoder’s essays. Ochs applauds Yoder’s attempt to do what he calls “depth historiography,” which refuses to rest content with plain-sense accounts of history that remove real drama from the past (and, by extension, the present).²¹ In addition, Ochs agrees with Yoder that the complicated, intertwined history shared by both Christians and the rabbinic communities that would become mainline “Judaism” implies that contemporary Jews and Christians have substantial (i.e., theological) reasons for revisiting the nature of their relationship.

However, Ochs contends that Yoder’s laudable efforts at historical retrieval are burdened by the imposition of a binary logic that too easily divides historical examples into faithful or unfaithful categories: Christians must be *either*

²¹ As Ochs clarifies, a post-critical appropriation of history need not be equated with the nineteenth-century hermeneutics of someone like Schleiermacher, in which sympathetic imagination enables us to know our predecessors almost if not better than they knew themselves: “We are claiming, instead, to learn about ourselves now by imagining ourselves in their skins then.” (Ochs, commentary on Yoder, ‘It Did Not Have to Be’ in *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 67).

“Jewish,” congregational, and free-church, *or* “Constantinian”; Jews must *either* remain committed to the vision of “exile as mission”²² *or* become Constantinian themselves. For Ochs, Yoder undermines his own efforts to promote a dialogue between Jews and Christians about the divine word addressed to both communities. He does this by assuming too much in advance about the outcome of such an encounter.²³ While Yoder tells a story into which both Jews and Christians can insert themselves, it turns out to be a kind of procrustean bed into which a great many Jews and Christians, past and present, simply cannot fit. Though at one point he lauds the kind of rabbinic or Talmudic logic that could skillfully hold several possibilities in tension, Yoder struggles to imagine a Judaism that is willing to witness to God’s name in exile *and* which refuses to spiritualize the concrete, geographical landedness and the fleshly peoplehood of Israel. Ultimately, Ochs laments, Yoder privileges a specific chapter in Jeremiah’s prophecies to such an extent that he does violence to other important voices within the canon. In the end, Yoder became a kind of supercessionist in spite of himself, as he eventually decided to leave large parts of the Jewish and Christian story behind.

Others have begun to take up the crucial task of addressing issues of Christian-Jewish relations and the theological problematic of supercessionism “after Yoder.” The next section draws upon Herbert Butterfield’s work to clarify,

²²*Jewish-Christian, Schism*, 190. “Exile (*galut*) as mission” is a prominent theme in several essays from one of Yoder’s last published collections, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

²³ Ochs, commentary on “It did not have to be,” *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 68.

from a self-consciously historiographical perspective, some of the particularly thorny issues Yoder's work raised so provocatively and to gather some hints for a way forward. To recap: Yoder moved from: (1) questioning prereflective assumptions about how the past turned into the present, to (2) showing how historical study can open up new possibilities in the present, to (3) making claims about how the future should go, *based on distinct judgments about how the past could (and should) have gone*.

As we will see, it is tempting to conclude that at a certain point, in line with conventional stereotypes (“theologians like neatness and closure; ‘historians’ give us messiness and ambiguity”), Yoder stopped doing history and returned to being a mere theologian or ethicist, more interested in conceptual clarity than attention to complex particulars. However, sin, providence, and “history” and their relationships are issues central to the work of both theologians and historians, whether they use the terms or not. Yoder made a formidable argument for why good theology needs good history. For his part, Butterfield made a compelling case for why history done well ultimately awakens a desire for good theology.

Butterfield on History, Providence, and Moral Judgment

In *The Whig Interpretation of History* (first edition, 1931), Butterfield cried “foul” regarding

the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to

emphasize certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.²⁴

Butterfield's critique has significant affinities with Yoder's understanding of the "inappropriate *a priori*" that muffle the voice of history. The self-satisfied agents and heirs of "successful" revolutions tend to portray past upheavals as inevitable and excusable. Moreover, histories driven by impersonal principles of progress leave little room for the realm of moral freedom Yoder saw as essential to any rightly told history. Butterfield negotiated some of the theological and historiographical tensions between using history to open up new possibilities for what *could* have been (and might be), and making definitive moral claims about what *should* have been. At the outset, however, it is important to establish that Yoder and Butterfield occupied similar space on the spectrum of historiographical opinion.

Whiggish and Constantinian Historiography

For Yoder, "it did not have to be," is not special pleading but a challenge to see what is actually there--the abundant evidence showing us particular people and communities that cannot be reduced to abstractions ("sectarians," "inclusivists," "realists," etc.) and that employ moral freedom as they wrestle with multiple options and sometimes make choices they could not themselves have predicted.²⁵ Thus, he argued, historical explanations that remove these

²⁴Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton, 1965), v.

²⁵ "We do not posit "freedom" more than a doctrinaire Marxist or Darwinist would because we have sold out to a religious world view; we find decision in the story because it is in

elements from their accounts “do violence to the lived reality of history as it really was.”²⁶ In this concern for the past “as it really was,” historians are likely to hear an echo of Leopold von Ranke, the nineteenth-century German whose stringent methodology set the standard for the modern discipline of history. It is in their shared profession of certain Rankean sentiments that we begin to find the greatest intellectual affinity between Yoder and Butterfield.

As Peter Novick notes, Anglo-American historians have tended to identify Ranke with a positivist historiography that insists on the need for, and possibility of, “objective history” (history “as it really [i.e., ‘factually’] was”). However, Novick also observes that many of Ranke’s admirers have ignored another, romantic side of Ranke’s thought, in which he understood history writing as more analogous to a skilled craft than to a potentially exhaustive or cumulative science. *Wie es eigentlich gewesen*, traditionally carried into English as “as it really was,” can also be rendered, “as it essentially was.” In this second sense, the goal of history-writing—however ultimately inaccessible—is to resurrect the past in its unique integrity, such that we can recognize that its challenges and opportunities were as complex as our own present.²⁷

Working in a similar vein, Butterfield criticized historians and moderns in general who allow a certain master story about the West’s progress out of the dark ages to serve as a magnet inevitably pulling historical sources into a specific

the documents when we are honest with them.” Yoder, “Evangelical Revisionism,” 27.

²⁶ Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 43.

²⁷Peter J. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26-31.

shape. Most of Butterfield's examples in *Whig Interpretation* are taken from popular interpretations of the Protestant Reformation. A paradigmatic question posed by present-minded "whiggish" history is, "to whom do we owe our religious liberty?" In such accounts, the Reformation "had to be" in order to break the exhausted late-medieval world out of its mold. Butterfield's whig historians repeatedly insist on treating Martin Luther as the first modern, who--even if he sounds to many as benighted as other medievals in his polemical preoccupation with theological truth--nevertheless cast his lot on the "right side of history" by pitting his solitary conscience against heteronomous authority, thus propelling the world in the direction it was meant to move.

Butterfield warned that fundamental misrepresentations of the past occur when historical agents are employed as characters in a story that is really about the present, its origins, and causes. Similarly, Yoder's conception of Constantinianism was not simply shorthand for the Church's exchanging of costly discipleship for secular power and influence. As he described, it, Constantinianism is fundamentally a simplistic and presumptive historical hermeneutic:

Before Constantine, one knew as a fact of everyday experience that there was a believing Christian community but one had to "take it on faith" that God was governing history. After Constantine, one had to believe without seeing that there was a community of believers, within the larger nominally Christian mass, but one knew for a fact that God was in control of history.²⁸

²⁸Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (South Bend: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 137.

Both whiggish history and Constantinianism presuppose the perspicuity of history, and conclude that, for all practical purposes, we have reached history's end (in the dual sense of both *terminus* and *telos*). Both assume that we can rest assured that God, or at least an impersonal, immanent process, is in control through the providential agency of the contemporary powers that be--whether Caesar or the abstract principles of modern theory.²⁹

Butterfield and Yoder would have agreed that good history cannot dismiss talk of objectivity if such language serves to uphold the integrity of a disciplined, common attempt to approach the past, as nearly as possible, on its own terms. With Yoder, Butterfield would agree that, to the extent we can do so, "history" must be freed from inappropriate *a priori*s before we try to appropriate a usable past for contemporary purposes. However, unlike Yoder, Butterfield would have denied that a historian or a Christian can make moral arguments about how the future should go, based on *definitive* judgments about what the past should have been.

Providence and the Three Levels of History

While we can conclude that Butterfield would join Yoder in rejecting

²⁹ Yoder inelegantly described something like Butterfield's whig historiography as "neo-Constantinianism." In this instantiation of the perennial temptation to historicize everyone but ourselves, church and state may be institutionally separate, but "moral identification of church and state remains." Rather than Caesar, divine providence now exercises benevolent control through the will of the democratic majority and/or through constitutionally enshrined principles of freedom and equality (*ibid.*, 142). Yoder's second stage (neo-Constantinianism) refers to the smaller establishments created in the wake of the Reformation ("*cuius regio, eius religio*"). See the section on "The Ever-new Shape of Establishment" in *ibid.*, 141-144.

Constantinian historiography, he would almost certainly question the helpfulness of “Constantinianism” as a useful historical description for wide swaths of the Christian past. In *Whig Interpretation*, Butterfield specifically addressed the task of recounting the momentous events of the fourth Christian century. While he recognized that it is natural to want to capture this epoch in terms like the “triumph of Christianity over paganism” he believed that it is

much more illuminating to watch it as the interplay of personalities and people, with the four winds of heaven blowing around them; much more interesting if we can take the general statement with which we began, the mere formula for what happened in this age, and pursue it in its concrete incidence till we discover into what manifold detail it differentiates itself, and learn how various were its workings in actual life, how surprising even its by-play and the side-issues which it raised, how rich its underlying complexity and its implications in human story. It is along this road that the historian carries us, away from the world of general ideas.³⁰

In statements like this, Butterfield sounded like he was calling for the training of pure historians who, by a rigorous asceticism, would deny themselves the indulgence of inserting moral and philosophical concerns into their description of the past. Again, this is one way to read how the matter stands between Yoder and Butterfield: Yoder eventually left off being an “amateur” historian and started imposing his rarefied theological concepts and abstract moral rigor on the intransigent messiness of history.

However, Butterfield acknowledged that the astringent historiography he advocated seems to require nothing less than the absurdity of a thick description of all that has ever happened. Good history must also try to talk about those

³⁰ Butterfield, *WIH*, 70-71.

larger patterns in time that do place significant constraints on individuals' agency, even if these forces cannot eradicate the unpredictability of human choices. He described this as the problem of "abridgement" and, while conceding that abridgement was necessary, he insisted that it should be done without marring the overall shape of the past. The question is, what is that shape?

We may believe in some providence that guides the destiny of men and we may if we like read this into our history; but what our history brings to us is not proof of providence but rather the realization of how mysterious are its ways, how strange its caprices--the knowledge that this providence uses any means to get to its end and works often at cross purposes with itself and is curiously wayward.³¹

Butterfield seemed determined to avoid admitting the tremendous tension in a passage like this. He wanted to maintain the principle of presuppositionless history, yet he offered his own surmise about "what history brings to us" in the manner of an unchallengeable axiom. He would later confess that the very possibility of historical realism rests on a fundamental conviction that "history" is not the mere product of blind chance and is ultimately enfolded in some kind of providence. But, to use a characteristically Butterfieldian term, this axiom was extremely "elastic." Providence is no simple matter.

What Butterfield saw is that anyone dealing with history at any depth encounters the dilemma of how to speak about the past in ways that do justice to the drama taking place on two levels: the "biographical" or synchronic (e.g., the realm of freedom, in which nothing "had to be") and the "scientific" or

³¹ Butterfield, *WIH*, 23.

diachronic (e.g., Yoder's use of "Constantinianism" to describe a mindset from which he believed mainstream Christianity since the fourth century [or earlier, as *The Jewish-Christian Schism* implied] has rarely been able to escape). When dealing with this first level of particular people and their choices, he claimed, the most stringent moral evaluations are appropriate, and no one should escape judgment. The second level includes both generally observable tendencies (e.g., periods of military mobilization generally precede the onset of hostile engagements) and what he often referred to as "the history-making going on over our heads"--great historical forces such as "Industrialization" or epochal shifts in habits of thought and forms of life such as "Enlightenment" or "Modernity." Because it is much harder to locate individual responsibility when searching out the past on this "scientific" or "expository" level, it provides "the great opportunity for Christian charity in history . . . we might almost say that [a Christian] cannot read history without being a little sorry for everybody."³²

Refusing in principle to let one immanent historical level eclipse the other, Butterfield concluded that the Christian "must" say that there is a third level, in which a benevolent Providence enfolds human free will as well as probabilistic "laws" of historical causation, and those movements of thought and life which

³² "So you have free will in history, and the statesmen of 1914 are blamable for unloosing the horses of war. But also you have the operations of laws and processes in history, and the statesmen of 1914 are not as blamable as they might have seemed at first sight, perhaps not more blamable than you yourself might have been if you had been in the same historical predicament – perhaps not more blamable than you yourself have often been at moments when the disaster was only reduced because you did not happen to be a statesman responsible for the welfare of millions of people" (Butterfield, "God in History," 10-11).

human beings are tempted to attribute to chance. However, this third, “providential” level can only be seen through a mirror darkly. One might extend Butterfield’s account to say that the “providence” historical study enables us to see is no more than a fleeting glimpse of God’s “backside” (cf. Exodus 33-34).

For Butterfield, in their rush to identify causes and origins of the present, the narratives of whig historians at best get the story half-right. They fail to recognize that

[i]t is not by a line but by a labyrinthine piece of network that one would have to make the diagram of the course by which religious liberty has come down to us, for this liberty comes by devious tracks and is born of strange conjunctures, it represents purposes marred perhaps more than purposes achieved, and it owes more than we can tell to many agencies that had little to do with either religion or liberty. We cannot tell to whom we must be grateful for this religious liberty and there is no logic in being grateful to anybody or anything except to the whole past which produced the whole present; unless indeed we choose to be grateful to that providence which turned so many conjunctures to our ultimate profit.³³

This passage contains Butterfield’s characteristic concerns. Most important here is his sense of the inscrutability of history. For Butterfield, wise historians (and Christians) recognize the “labyrinthine network” that is the past and are therefore reticent to forge the kinds of retrospective causality links Yoder warned against. “It did not have to be” is a necessary historical corrective because it signals an apophatic reserve which acknowledges that we cannot hope to account for all that was going on such that we can say, with confidence, that certain developments--e.g., the first-century tensions between “Jew” and

³³ Butterfield, *WIH*, 45.

“Gentile” Christians leading to *the* “Jewish-Christian Schism,”³⁴--could not have been otherwise.

But this inscrutability goes in more than one direction. Both retrospective moralizing and prospective, counterfactual (“if only x, then y”) projections are misleading. Butterfield did not understand “providence” as an esoteric reference to an elusive god of the historical gaps. At least in part, “providence” in a generic sense is a reasonable inference drawn from close attention to the past:

An important aspect of the historical process is the work of the new generation forever playing providence over even the disasters of the old . . .
 . . .³⁵ The whig historian thinks that the course of history, the passage of centuries can give judgment on a man or an age or a movement. In reality there is only one thing that history can say on this matter, and this itself is so commonplace that it can almost be reduced to a piece of tautology. It is, that *provided disaster is not utterly irretrievable--provided a generation is not destroyed or a state wiped entirely from the map--there is no sin or error or calamity can take place but succeeding generations will make the best of it*; and though it be a Black Death or a Fire of London that comes as a scourge and a visitation, men will still make virtue of necessity and use the very downfall of the old world as the opportunity for making a new, till the whig historian looking back upon the catastrophe can see only the acquired advantages and the happy readjustments. So in the result the whig historian will be tempted to forget the sufferings of a generation, and will find it easy to assert that the original tragedy was no tragedy at all.³⁶

For Butterfield, providence can never be simply identified with “what happened.” It is not another word for fate or determinism or the gleeful insistence that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He would probably say something to the effect that providence is best understood as “what happened, in

³⁴ The emergence of the Baptist movement as a separate, and eventually prominent, sub-tradition of global Christianity?

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

light of what happened” -- or, “what happened (and keeps happening), in light of what happened (and keeps happening, so long as God remains patient and human beings remain as we know them to be).”

Summary

In his sympathetic yet critical reading of Yoder, Peter Ochs argues that Yoder was something of a pioneer in the “postliberal” Christian attempt to combine both classical Christology and non-supersessionism (i.e., to read the gospel as inseparable from the *continual* reading and re-reading of the Old Testament narratives of the people Israel). However, he concludes that, as a pioneer, Yoder sometimes retained unfortunate reading and reasoning habits. Yoder was right in what he rejected (“Constantinian Christianity” and classic supersessionism) but wrong in how he stated the possibilities for how things could have been otherwise.³⁷ For Ochs, at times, Yoder’s solution for erroneous

³⁷ Ochs’s largely sympathetic yet critical reading of Yoder will be presented more fully in, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christian Theology and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, [August?] 2011). Here is Ochs’s most succinct summary of his analysis:

All my criticisms of Yoder can be reduced to this syllogism: a) Both rabbinic Judaism and the Free Church resist being defined by the set of choices that includes strict landedness, non-pacifism, centralization, anti-missionizing, and so on; b) Yoder assumes that this resistance is equivalent to logical negation within a binary system (one defined by the law of excluded middle): so that we can infer from “a” that both rabbinic Judaism and the Free Church affirm the set of choices that includes strict non-landedness, pacifism, de-centralization, missionizing, and so on; c) But Yoder’s assumption is not warranted. “a” is consistent with the inference (b’) that rabbinic Judaism and the Free Church resist these initial choices in different ways. The rabbinic way, alone, assigns three values to each of the choices: affirmed or denied or denied only in a strict sense, but affirmed in an indeterminate sense. Thus, Yoder has not shown that rabbinic Judaism denies the following set of choices: dual states of living on the land and not on the land, avoiding violence and accommodating violence, resisting national politics and accommodating it,

scriptural hermeneutics is not to urge this continual reading and re-reading of Israel and Gospel together (which generates ever-new yet still recognizable insights) but to insist on a particular reading driven by clear and distinct, once-and-for-all concepts (such as “Jeremianic,” “exilic” or “pacifist” Judaism).³⁸

Yoder was convinced that overcoming Christian supercessionism by re-visioning the Jewish-Christian Schism would play a crucial role in any revitalization of the church. He believed certain kinds of supercessionist biblical hermeneutics were responsible for (or at least tied up in) the heinous assumptions that made it so hard for modern, Western Christians to take seriously the politics of Jesus. Yet Ochs’s critique of Yoder’s work on the Jewish-Christian schism supports the claim that a particular form of supercessionism remains operative (if only latent) in Protestant (or non-Catholic, non-Orthodox) consciousness – particularly radical and free church Protestant traditions for whom what the state of the late medieval church required was not simply reformation but revolution or restoration.

Supercessionism can be defined simply as the belief that God has replaced his love for a particular people with love for another people. Stated that bluntly, few would own the term. However, it is easier to pin the supercessionist label on

accepting proselytizing and conversion but resisting both global mission and the pursuit of a single religion of humanity (draft copy of *The Free Church and Israel’s Covenant*, 21-22).

³⁸ “I do not at all fear the contents of these emblems. I fear only the conceptual finality of their form, for I fear that this is precisely the form of secular western rationalism rather than of the redemptive pattern of God’s word among us. . . . These conceptual forms are not the skins of Jacob, but of the secularized uses of Enlightenment thinking that bred nationalism along with a reduced hermeneutic of reason. I do not trust such skins. (draft of Ochs, *The Free Church and Israel’s Covenant*, 22-23, my emphasis).

others than to give a satisfying account of the past that accounts for so many real, violent and certainly tragic rifts in fellowship. We can easily get submerged in deep waters here and lose sight of our particular discussion, but it is important to recall that “history” is almost always undertaken in response to some sense of rupture between the present and a past grown strange and different. This historical sensibility has always been a characteristic feature of biblical faith--and so also has the continual attempt to find ways to describe how the covenant God brings unity and healing amidst these very real ruptures of our past (cf. the quotation from Rowan Williams on page one). This is what it means to be a *“biblical religion after.”*

Butterfield claimed that historians generally opt for working as an “avenger” or a “reconciler” and he was convinced that neither mode, on its own, makes possible an ultimately satisfying encounter with the tangled reality of the human past.³⁹ Thus, history at its best and most honest repeatedly ends in a kind of Augustinian restlessness in the form of a desire for these legitimate instincts themselves to be reconciled. Butterfield’s apophatic account of providence bears a resemblance to Ochs’s account of the postliberal “theo-logic” of scriptural reasoning in that a certain kind of indeterminacy is necessary--not to make space

³⁹ “It has been said that the historian is the avenger, and that standing as a judge between the parties and rivalries and causes of bygone generations he can lift up the fallen and beat down the proud, and by his exposures and his verdicts, his satire and his moral indignation, can punish unrighteousness, avenge the injured or reward the innocent. . . . But if the historian can rear himself up like a god and judge, or stand as the official avenger of the crimes of the past, then one can require that he shall be still more godlike and regard himself rather as the reconciler than as the avenger; taking that his aim is to achieve the understanding of the men and parties and causes of the past and that in this understanding, if it can be complete, all things will ultimately be recognized” (Butterfield, *WIH*, 1-2).

for “pluralism” per se--but to keep drawing us back to the object of our study and its ultimate strangeness.

A desire for reconciliation drove Yoder’s efforts to re-envision the Jewish-Christian schism and the distant origins of his own Anabaptist/Mennonite community: situations in which Anabaptists are defined over against other Christian peoples and in which Christianity is defined over against Judaism *did not have to be*. Yet, out of an equally intense resolve, he also became something of an avenger, maintaining that the corollary of a historiography that emphasizes human freedom is an insistence on the reality of sin and moral culpability: certain things *should have been otherwise*.⁴⁰ Gerald Schlabach has offered a kind of Butterfieldian assist or Ochsian pragmatic “repair” of Yoder by claiming that the real challenge for God’s people in history is best described not as Constantinianism but “Deuteronomism” – i.e., how to “enter the land” or receive faithfully the genuinely good blessings God bestows.⁴¹ To make this move is not to resolve the problematic of continuity and discontinuity, rupture and repair in history by smoothing over real tragedy. Rather, to shift from a categorical historical judgment (“Constantinianism”) to a scriptural figure or trope makes clear how even the unfaithfulness of God’s people can be incorporated into

⁴⁰ According to Yoder, “[d]oubting that things had to go as they did *way back when* correlates logically with doubting the rightness of how they continued to go later” (*Jewish-Christian Schism*, 45). Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Gerald Schlabach, “Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?” In *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, edited by S. Hauerwas, C. Huebner, H. Huebner, & M. Nation, 449–471 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

God's story, the God that we know in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Postscript:

"Thank God, the Baptist Movement (Never Should Have) Happened?"

To inquire after the ways of God in time is to attempt to plumb the expanses Paul surveyed in Romans 9-11, after which he could say no more than, "O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"⁴²

John Henry Newman (in)famously asserted that "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant." With fear and trembling, then, I would like to ask: can Baptists do more than simply dismiss this word as the polemical excess of a deluded opponent? What if to be "deep in history" is to disavow forms of intra-Christian supersessionism?⁴³ And what if we read "ceasing to be Protestant" to mean "ceasing to be a Christian people defined over-against our catholic past and the contemporary Roman Catholic Church" or, perhaps even, "ceasing to anchor one's Christian distinctiveness in ongoing, anxious attempts to confirm that one is in a pure (or purer) church"?

What drew me to this study is a conviction that it is critical that Baptists find ways of acknowledging our identity – as Baptists – as a contingent, "providential" gift to be received, and not a necessity to be defended (historiographically and theologically) as such. This is on one level a familiar,

⁴² Rom. 11:33 (NRSV).

⁴³ Perhaps, since it certainly does not fully address Newman's concerns, what I am suggesting is more like "wading into history."

traditional claim.⁴⁴ But it entails a disposition or posture that is difficult to inhabit. To raise the possibility that Baptists are not, strictly speaking or ultimately, necessary is to invite existential anxiety (i.e., the “Hamlet question”).

Can we say that the Baptist movement “did not have to be”? Are Baptists, strictly speaking, necessary? To answer “no” to the latter question seems to be a capitulation to a post-denominational consumer spirituality that reduces the convictions bequeathed to us to little more than ephemeral “styles” to be mixed and matched, adopted and abandoned, with ease. Contemporary anxieties about identity in the flux of globalized culture make the biblical injunction to remember all the more critical and its practice contested and complicated. My assertion that contemporary Baptists ought to understand ourselves as something like an historical accident raises more questions and requires more explication, argument, and nuance than a single essay or solitary thinker can provide, and I welcome assistance and correction.

If our existence is contingent upon a mysterious providence rather than a necessity we can define, what advantage, then, is there in being Baptist? Much in every way! By the grace of God and thanks to the (sometimes costly) witness of many generations, we, too, are “in Christ.” Isn’t that enough?

⁴⁴ Recall Paul’s warning that the engrafted “wild olive shoot” ought not boast in its new status – Rom. 11:17-21.

