

His failure to employ and conceptualize such an important concept for political theology from a specifically Orthodox perspective is a lost opportunity for dialogue. In addition, the combination of this with his general neglect of the *imago Dei* detrimentally skews his political theology.

Nevertheless, the flaws of *The Mystical as Political* do not wholly detract from its merits. It is, indeed, essential reading and puts forward a challenging and uncompromising affirmation of human dignity, personhood, and politics colored by the light of the Orthodox concept of divine-human communion, while admirably endeavoring not to confuse the ecclesial with the political nor neglect the ascetic and relational reality of human community and love.

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## Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder's Trinitarian Theology of Culture

**Branson Parler**

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Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder is best remembered as the author of *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), an effort to set forth a distinctive christological ethic predicated on the assumption that Jesus' life is normative for our social and political life. Although Yoder's efforts have been criticized over the decades by, especially, Reformed theologians, Branson L. Parler, a theologian at Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has written an engaging and sympathetic analysis of Yoder's thought that is well worth reading and reflecting on.

Parler's principal aim in this volume is to dispel what he views as misconceptions Reformed Christians have concerning Yoder. In so doing he gives almost a Kuyperian reading of Yoder, showing how seriously the latter takes creation and its redemption in Jesus Christ. In Yoder, creation and redemption are continuous, such that "what God desires of humanity's cultural life in creation does not contradict what God desires of humanity's cultural life in redemption and reconciliation" (25). Parler is at pains to emphasize this because Yoder's critics, perhaps reading him through his better-known protégé Stanley Hauerwas, have often accused him of focusing too much on the church at the expense of the larger society.

After setting out his thesis in the introductory chapter, Parler surprisingly departs from the principal subject of his study and devotes his second chapter to an analysis of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr on Christ, creation, and culture. Admitting that his readers might well skip to chapter 3 to pick up the main line of his argument, Parler takes up a topic that might better have been dealt with in a separate volume. Nevertheless, this chapter is valuable in that it shows rather convincingly that the Niebuhr brothers, often

compared favorably to Yoder, are less orthodox than is commonly assumed. In this respect, the Niebuhrs, despite their vaunted Augustinianism, in reality conflate creation and sin, thereby leaving us lacking “any criteria by which to judge faithfulness or unfaithfulness to [our] Lord” (68).

In chapter 3, Parler responds to critics who charge Yoder with discounting creedal orthodoxy. Given Yoder’s well-known criticism of Constantinianism, and given the Emperor Constantine’s role in the Council of Nicaea, Yoder would seem to be a dissident from the creeds. Not so, says Parler. Although Yoder did find the early ecumenical councils procedurally flawed due to emperors’ inappropriate influence, Yoder was far from despising the creeds: “Nicaea and Chalcedon want to be faithful to Scripture; so does Yoder. Yoder takes the divinity of Jesus seriously; so does Nicaea. Yoder takes the humanity of Jesus seriously; so does Chalcedon” (99).

In chapter 4, we see Yoder emphasizing the continuities between the Old and New Testaments rather than the discontinuities that critics associate with the Anabaptist tradition. For Yoder, the move from Old to New takes us, not from law to grace, but “from grace to grace” (105). Accordingly, there is no dualism between the respective ethics of old and new covenants. God is concerned with the whole life of his people in both, including politics, economics, and society. Here Parler raises a major issue on which Yoder most differs from the Reformed tradition, namely, his conviction that Jesus’ humanity is normative for our humanity. This troubles Reformed Christians for two principal reasons.

First and foremost, Jesus’ work in salvation was singular and cannot be repeated by his followers. Yes, Jesus calls his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, but the deaths of the martyrs are not redemptive in the same way as Jesus’ death because Jesus is the unique Son of God. Without sufficient clarity on this point, one might be tempted to embrace a moral example view of the atonement, an error accepted by so many theologians in the past. Second, although there may be something to be said in favor of Jesus’ life as paradigmatic for our own, once we recall that Jesus did not run for political office, write a book, create a great work of art, open a business, or join a labor union, it quickly becomes difficult to apply his example consistently across the board. These are concerns that Parler perhaps ought to have addressed. Without doing so, those skeptical of Yoder’s approach will likely not be fully persuaded.

In chapter 5, Parler introduces us to Yoder’s interpretation of the biblical expression “principalities and powers.” What are these powers? They cover a variety of phenomena best summed up in the word *structures*. “In social fields, it can point to institutions, agencies, and offices” (135), or to such intangible realities as Wall Street, the more tangible building, or even the grammatical structure of a language. According to Yoder, “[t]he concept ‘structure’ functions to point to the patterns or regularities that transcend or precede or condition the individual phenomena we can immediately perceive” (135).

Yoder affirms that the powers are created good, though they are now fallen. In particular, they claim more from us than they have a right to, vying for our ultimate allegiance. Power is capable of being used in a variety of ways, both for good and for ill. Although power is subject to Christ’s lordship, it seems that not every power relates to this lordship

in the same way. Parler cites a revealing passage from Yoder: “some kinds and forms of power are intrinsically good as a celebration of God’s creative purpose, and others are intrinsically fallen as an instrument of pride and self-serving” (139). Yet contrary to Yoder (assuming Parler’s reading of him is correct), it would seem more biblical to affirm that all forms of power are simultaneously God’s good creation and fallen into sin. Even the best of human culture is capable of being misdirected by sinful human beings.

The flaw in Yoder’s reasoning can be seen in a series of apparent polarities Parler lists on page 143: “authority versus compassion, rationality versus relatedness, manipulation versus interaction, distancing versus identification.” Although the point of this list is to comment on gender stereotypes by positioning Jesus on the side of the more “feminine” pole in each pair, the reality is that even compassion, as warm and wonderful as it can be, is as susceptible to sinful distortion as is authority. We all know of authoritarian leaders who abuse their offices at others’ expense, but misplaced compassion can as easily pervert justice by prompting us to favor unfairly those with whom we can most easily identify. Something similar can be said of competition and cooperation, the latter of which superficially appears more Christlike. For example, price-fixing is a misdirected form of cooperation, while a contest to raise funds for cancer research is a positive form of competition. Obviously the line between good and evil runs through cooperation and competition rather than between them.

Yoder’s specifically political thought comes to the fore in chapter 6. According to Yoder, the biblical death penalty is rooted not in retributive justice but in ritual sacrifice. The principal concern of Scripture is not to demand a life for a life but rather to harness “the retaliatory reflex of fallen humans by placing it within the context of this sacrificial worldview” (173). Yes, the state bears the sword but not as a creational ordinance. Far from sanctioning it, God moves to restrain this sword power for the sake of preserving rather than destroying life.

Tellingly, Yoder declines to postulate an “ideal sword-bearing state ‘as such’” (180). According to Parler, “Yoder argues that we do not need more theories about the ideal state, but we do need increased attention to the practices of our particular state so the state can be called to use its power in accordance with the politics of Jesus and the power of creation, one concrete practice at a time” (181). To speak of an *ideal* state may indeed be too reminiscent of Plato, but surely we are obligated to reflect on the proper *political norms* to which flesh-and-blood governments ought to be held. Otherwise we have little to call them to, because holding up Jesus as exemplar will not, by itself, offer much to go on.

In Parler’s final chapter, the author sets forth Yoder’s concept of the church as sacrament, something readers may find surprising given that Mennonites are not generally associated with sacramental theology.

Although Yoder’s distinctive approach to culture is not without its flaws, reading Parler’s treatment of Yoder is definitely worthwhile for those interested in probing more deeply into one of the key theologians of the second half of the twentieth century.

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