
Like all the marks of the Church, holiness is difficult. There can be no evasion of this difficulty and no anaesthetic for the wounded and wounding peccability of the Church. There can, however, be patience, promise, and the gift of praise. Foregrounding this difficulty and corrigible peccability ensures that Alexander Sider's Yoderian reflections cannot easily be accused of the naivety and idealisation that less careful readers have often erroneously attributed to Yoder himself. Sider rightly presents Yoder's ecclesiology as one which 'foregrounded attention to difficult labors of ecclesiological self-questioning' (pp. 200-201). Through five suggestive and dense chapters (the book still inevitably bears some marks of its former incarnation as a doctoral dissertation), Sider stages a series of fascinating dialogues and contrasts which seek to elaborate upon Yoder's 'sense of our awashness in history … [which] generates an ethos that disavows the mastery of time and contingency in favor of an account of the Christian life as publicity and praise and time as grace' (p. 198).

After an enjoyable exegesis of the difficulty of holiness in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the first chapter contrasts two visions of praise as politics. Oliver O'Donovan's account is found wanting in that it conceives of the vindication of the created order as logically distinct from the creation and mission of the church. The effect of this is that even O'Donovan's famous articulation of the 'doctrine of the two' is unable to render the fragile practices of the Church in such a way as to bear materially on the enactment of political theorems derived independently of the divine election of that community. By contrast, Yoder's ecclesiology and eschatology allow for no account of politics and authority that are ontologically or epistemologically prior to the constitution of the ecclesial community.

The second chapter engages with an often under-appreciated influence on Yoder: Ernst Troeltsch. Yoder and Troeltsch are shown to share a historiographical concern to sustain equivocation in the face of the temptation to impose a premature unity on history (p. 69). Whereas Troeltsch's idealism ends up with a purely formal and contentless eschatology which all too easily resolves the tension between historical contingency and durability, Yoder is shown to largely refuse to tame historical complexity. 'For Yoder, our uses and conceptions of history are false and unhistorical to the extent that they generate an ethos of political and epistemological mastery,
because they do not imitate the faithful obedience and self-denying patience of Christ’ (p. 96).

Sider’s third chapter then identifies perhaps the most significant blind-spot in Yoder’s own historiographical enterprise: the tension between the emphasis on ‘unhandling history’ and the narrative trope of Constantinianism, in which a complex and ambiguous past is rendered useable as a foil for restorationist ecclesiology (pp. 103, 201). The criticism of this ironically ‘Constantinian’ method is well identified and largely undeniable. It may, as Sider insists, be sustained without thereby compromising the acute diagnosis of the theological mistakes from which flows the violent quest for a control over contingency.

The eschatological inversion of an undue mastery over history is the effacement of the wounds of the past, found in Miroslav Volf’s construal of forgiveness as divine nonremembering. In the fourth chapter, Sider shows that, as with O’Donovan’s reading of the restoration of the created order, so Volf’s account of forgiveness ‘requires a radical disjunction between the church’s work for reconciliation now and the eschatological reconciliation God will effect with “the grace of nonremembering” and “the creation of all things new”’ (p. 157).

A final chapter addresses the charge of a modernist voluntarism in Yoder’s ecclesiology by showing that Yoder’s invocation of ‘dialogical vulnerability’ is analogous to and illuminated by Alasdair MacIntyre’s development of the notion of ‘appropriate dependency’ on others. On this basis Sider draws an incisive contrast between Yoder’s sustained emphasis on the broken corrigibility of actual ecclesial practices and the all too easy absorption of the other in John Milbank’s harmonisation of otherness. Critically, in the latter a largely futurist eschatological promise of the triumph of an ontology of peace and gift buffers one against the risk of genuine vulnerability now.

We might apply to Sider’s own work Yoder’s historiographical principle of ‘looping back’ to insights not previously appreciated in the history of reception. His reflections on Yoder in relation to Milbank, O’Donovan, Troeltsch and Volf each present acute diagnoses of the shortcomings of those theologians’ arguments. The reader may, however, be left wanting more. Given the highly pregnant comments in the book’s conclusion, and the frequent deployment of notions of equivocation and, to a lesser extent, diremption, a further exploration of the similarities and differences between Yoder’s theology and the more explicitly (if critically) Hegelian approach of Gillian Rose and Rowan Williams is perhaps to be hoped for.