Questioning the Regime of Orthodoxy:  
A Review Essay of Paul Martens’ The Heterodox Yoder


Tommy Givens  
Fuller Theological Seminary

While the title betrays an approach that obscures the needed criticism in the book, Paul Martens’ The Heterodox Yoder is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature analyzing and appropriating the work of John Howard Yoder. Martens situates Yoder’s more well-known publications – particularly The Politics of Jesus – within the abiding and thematic concerns of Yoder’s fifty years of writing. He does this with a view to identifying fundamental problems; there is one in particular: the transposition of “Christ’s lordship over the world into a form of secular social ethics that, in ‘real history’, yields a particular sociological or political position that is in no way particularly Christian” (146). Martens worries that Yoder and some of his intellectual allies (particularly Stanley Hauerwas) have allowed certain contemporary challenges to the Christian life (e.g., a “Methodist upbringing,” [147]) to dictate their correctives to the point that they become over-correctives or even heterodox correctives. He goes so far as to assert that such intellectual allies are not simply ignoring a few bad trees in Yoder’s “corpus” but misjudging the entire forest of his writings (17).

After estimating the burden of his argument for Yoder’s heterodoxy in chapter 1, Martens plunges into four chapters (chapters 2-5) that trace central contours of Yoder’s thought chronologically to their allegedly heterodox culmination, which he then spells out in the sixth and final chapter. The contours traced by Martens are themselves familiar to those acquainted with Yoder’s more well-known writings: the concern from his earliest days as a writer to recover discipleship and community as basic to the Christian life (chapter 2); the prioritization of politics in Yoder’s description of Jesus, Jewish history, the early church, and therefore the Christian life (chapter 3); his revisionist and historicist construal of the Jewish-Christian difference (chapter 4); and his re-description of sacrament in the service of ecumenism and church witness (chapter 5). These contours help to situate Yoder’s advocacy of Christian pacifism within his larger arguments about ecclesiology and the gospel, which are often ignored or underplayed by those who engage Yoder in the framework of The Politics of Jesus. While the introductory works of Mark Nation and Craig Carter have provided similarly panoramic presentations of Yoder’s work, they have not given as much attention to the emphases of his early writings or his concern with Jewish-Christian difference. Moreover, they do not share Martens’ agenda of exposing the fundamental flaws of Yoder’s theology.

Martens’ survey of Yoder’s development indicates several of Yoder’s tendencies that are in need of criticism. These tendencies are especially stark in particular overstatements by Yoder. Yoder repeatedly opposes politically faithful, biblical renderings of Jesus to dogmatic or metaphysical understandings (typical of “orthodoxy”), as if doctrine or metaphysics were superfluous or necessarily competitive with historicist or more politically explicit presentations.
Martens also rightly highlights the problematic dualism of “true politics vs. false politics,” which Yoder uses to analyze the people of God past and present, although I doubt that Martens’ adoption of orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy improves on this dualism (more on this later). The need to name the sins of the people of God does not justify these totalizing categories. Finally, Martens criticizes Yoder’s tendency to reduce sacrament to faithful social process. The dominical inaugurations of the sacraments were not characterized by the social faithfulness of Jesus’ disciples, which Yoder demands of Christian practice today. In my view, church traditions have been right to recognize that the words and other actions of the sacraments properly exceed the life of those participating.

Martens’ argument would benefit greatly from developing his criticism along the lines I have just suggested or other lines of his own. But instead of outlining some constructive account of what Yoder is omitting or displacing, and instead of indicating why it is important, he simply reiterates the charge that Yoder has erased the difference between theology and ethics—implying that this difference is key to the particularity of Christianity. Neither of these claims is ever substantiated. Especially unfortunate for Martens’ argument is the implication in chapter 4, on Yoder’s questionable revision of the standard account of the Jewish-Christian difference, that Yoder’s political or ethical account of the Christian life is too Jewish to be Christian: “It is precisely Yoder’s construal of the politics of Jesus—thereby reducing Jesus to his messianic politics—that creates the possibility of a shared language with [Steven] Schwarzchild” (115). A “shared language” with a Jew, like Schwarzchild, is itself supposedly evidence of Yoder’s heterodoxy. Only Christian “theology” (not Christian politics or Christian ethics), Martens assumes, can maintain the particularity of Christianity, which he effectively essentializes as being not Jewish.

Leaving aside the question of whether this sort of “theological” understanding of the Jewish-Christian difference is one that Christians should seek to vindicate, or the question of whether Martens has understood the implications of Yoder’s revisionist treatment of it, my primary concern with Martens’ larger argument is that he has provided no positive account of the Christian particularity that Yoder has supposedly compromised. This is what his argument needs in order to be persuasive. It is not enough to claim that theology and ethics should be distinct and to imply that “theology” is the basis of Christian particularity. Nor do mere lists of what Yoder decentralizes (e.g., “emotions, matters of the soul, spiritual development, divine mystery, propositional confessions of faith, etc.” [144]) amount to cogency. Martens must give some account of the “theology” that is both non-ethical and essential to Christian particularity, and he must show how “matters of the soul” and the like are at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

Martens admits that branding Yoder as heterodox assumes some clarity about what orthodoxy is and that an account of orthodoxy is difficult to provide given its fraught history. But then he substitutes Christian “particularity” for orthodoxy and assumes, but makes no argument for, what Christian particularity is. Readers are thus left with a vague accusation (e.g., Yoder’s voice “never could reconcile itself with the dominant strain of thought that is usually referred to as ‘orthodoxy’” [5]), that pushes debate from the question of where Yoder is wrong to that of how wrong he is, confusing the latter with the former. This is likely to muddle the debate, and that is unfortunate, since Martens points to genuine problems in Yoder’s thinking. We should be
debating where and how Yoder misleads us, not whether he crosses a vague boundary of orthodoxy—especially if using orthodoxy as a boundary begs not only the question of Christian (or Jewish) particularity but the very question of Yoder’s own account of God’s revelation.

Martens seems to overlook that orthodoxy as “the dominant strain of thought” (5) is precisely the inadequacy of orthodoxy, according to Yoder, and he offers no rebuttal to Yoder’s several arguments to this effect. Yoder contends that orthodoxy, as a regime not only of politics but of discourse and knowledge, has allowed Christian self-understandings as well as ways of governing and living to pass as true to God’s revelation—even the embodiment of that revelation—with no recognizable commitment to following Jesus’ teaching and example. God’s revelation in Jesus is thus reduced to a politically naked object of “belief,” if not a politically oppressive object of “belief.” What is more, according to Yoder, such objectification is a betrayal of the named object of orthodox “belief”—the politics of which cannot be culled from a supposedly more elemental or particular substance whose domain is “theology” (or specifically “Christology”).

As “the dominant strain,” the regime of orthodoxy has (a) suppressed the contingencies of its history, (b) silenced those who have questioned its dominance, and (c) hardened itself with respect to perceived opponent movements (especially movements we might describe as “more Jewish”). Thus hardened, orthodoxy has supplied its representatives with the means to ascribe to ourselves the possession or even embodiment of the truth of our confession and to police threatening differences as foundational rather than what they are: differences we have had a hand in making across time. Orthodoxy cannot control how orthodoxy is used and embodied; ignoring this, observes Yoder, its representatives have attributed to it and to ourselves a false totality, not least in our ways of reading Scripture. Martens displays precisely what Yoder denounces about orthodoxy in one instance when, in a footnote, he reduces Islam to a “temptation” of Christianity (45, n. 86). He thus suggests that Islam can be defined in such a way as to offer no wisdom for Christians, only a difference by which Christianity is reiteratively essentialized. But what Christianity and Islam attempt to name should not be reduced to or totalized as “systems existing primordially in a ‘normative’ form,” much less normative forms of mutual hostility.1

Despite his complaints about orthodoxy, Yoder’s response to its totalizing tendency is not to disregard it. Instead, he seeks to historicize and thicken it: to expose its masked contingencies, the distinctions overdrawn with it and perhaps by it, and its nuanced insights (at least if we are talking about orthodoxy in terms of its early creedal, “theological” forms). Rather than disown its creedal propositions in light of the violent politics often associated with them, Yoder repeatedly exegetes the formulae (e.g., Nicea and Chalcedon, as Martens acknowledges [see 22]) in order to clarify the inconsistency of such politics with them. This is of course coupled with criticism of attempts to govern through such metaphysical formulations in the first place, but it is not a dismissal of propositional orthodoxy. Martens tends to construe such criticism as a dismissal as well as the excessive politicization of theology, but Martens does not display a careful reading of Yoder in this construal. It is true that historicizing Christian orthodoxy, and emphasizing Christian orthopraxis, downgrades the currency of orthodoxy as a measure of the Christian life.

It is also true that Yoder is uncomfortable with being situated neatly “within” orthodoxy. But if this downgrade and discomfort are the problem, Martens’ charge of heterodoxy applies not only to Yoder’s work but also to most of historic Anabaptism (per 26, 92). It also applies to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who (a) criticized overly “theoretical and objectifying” Christology, (b) contended for a “religionless Christianity,” and consequently, (c) has been accused of advocating “the death of God.”

Two final and interrelated concerns about the pressure of the concepts of orthodoxy and particularity on Martens’ reading of Yoder: Martens’ quest to expose Yoder as heterodox encourages him to 1) over-interpret Yoder’s terse style and 2) ignore the ways in which Yoder writes as a voice in a conversation rather than as one issuing decrees. Martens worries justifiably that Yoder’s rhetoric and tone give the impression that his account of something (e.g., Jesus, Judaism, sacrament) is not a corrective but an absolute replacement of some established understanding (Martens uses the word “supersessive,” [142]). As I read Yoder, however, this style resists the tendency to imagine that diverse accounts of important matters are equally true, when some are in fact sounder than others, and others—sometimes well established ones—are outright wrong. Such “diversity” is not good, especially when the stakes are as high as the Christian justification of mass killing and oppression and when a discourse celebrating mere difference of opinion can act as the academic cover for regimes of violent power. Yoder’s take-no-prisoners style also reflects his conviction, I think, that some theological models (e.g., “pre-political,” pietist ones) are so misleading as to require something tantamount to replacement. While Martens is right to question some of Yoder’s essentializing tendencies, stretching Yoder’s authoritative style to constitute blunt heterodoxy leads Martens to ignore the ways in which Yoder warns readers against dismissing all the concerns of the views he is opposing and recognizes that he is one minority voice attempting to move the conversation to better footing and even to correct it. Martens construes Yoder’s style as propositionally absolutist, as offering the “only” correct understanding, a word that punctuates Martens’ glosses of Yoder in chapters 2, 3, and 4. However, this is an over-interpretation to which Yoder responds explicitly. In any case, construing the prioritization of politics as heterodox is puzzling given the virtually canonical status of works such as Augustine’s The City of God. Yoder claims to recover something we have depoliticized rather than to politicize something pre- or non-political. If Yoder’s understanding of politics leaves a distorted impression of Christianity, and I agree with Martens that it does in some places, then we should account for what has been distorted rather than simply construe the impression as heretical. Heterodoxy, after all, is not historically a matter of impressions but of assertions.

Chapter 5, “The New Shape of Ecumenism,” is written in the same lucid and winsome prose as the rest of the book and is perhaps Martens’ most vigorous argument against Yoder on the grounds that he is heterodox. This chapter displays acutely the pressure of Martens’

---


categorical indictment on Yoder’s work. In Yoder’s revisionist treatment of the concept and practice of sacramental theology, Martens discerns “a form of secular social ethics that, in ‘real history,’ yields a particular sociological or political position that is in no way particularly Christian” (146). I am especially sympathetic with Martens’ worries about Yoder’s anti-sacramentalism, as well as Yoder’s various claims to command the frame of reference of “real history” with his kind of political description. But the indictment of “not particularly Christian” seems to keep Martens from reading Yoder’s arguments within the debates to which they are addressed. One example: Yoder’s emphasis on the intelligibility of Christian practice or politics beyond the Christian community addresses the obsession in the 1980s and early 1990s (following the publication of, e.g., *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre) with the intelligibility of the faith when understood as tradition-mediated. This is particularly concerning to Yoder given the history of the Christian tradition’s claims to special revelation through the ecclesiastically-controlled sacraments, not least because these sacraments have often lost their politically liberating dimension as we find them in the New Testament. Yoder responds by arguing that the obsession with epistemic intelligibility is another way of clinging to Constantinian control and that sacramental practice as presented in the New Testament obviously makes intelligible claims on people beyond the Christian community, as Paul assumes in 1 Cor. 14 and the actual persecutions of Christians imply. Martens mistakes this intelligibility claim for an unwarranted assertion that Christian sacramental practice is indistinguishable from non-Christian political practice that conveys analogously liberating power, that Christian sacramental practice is immediately generalizable or universalizable. Where Yoder treats these matters most explicitly in *Body Politics*, it is quite clear that the “secular” development of each practice at the end of each chapter is just that: an elaboration of key Christian communal practices and not a mere non-Christian instance of the same political phenomenon. Yoder would no doubt say that certain non-Christian political practices are more faithful to Jesus than certain Christian sacramental practices, but he never implies that the confession that Jesus is Lord is immaterial or that the faithful sacramental practices of the Christian community are secondary, from a theo-political perspective.

The contribution of John Howard Yoder to the church, other political communities, and the academy is significant in part for the ways in which he troubled certain boundaries. While I question Martens’ apprehension of some of those boundaries, and of the ways in which Yoder troubled them, a critical reading of his stimulating book *The Heterodox Yoder* will enrich the debate about them and the reception of Yoder’s influential body of work.