Hope and Patience in John Howard Yoder’s Moral Reasoning

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Introduction

Revolutionary Christianity: The 1966 South American Lectures is the most recent posthumous publication from the work of the Christian ethicist John Howard Yoder, now of blessed memory. As a collection of Yoder’s writings from the year 1966 when he was 39 years old, the book is divided into three sections: “The Believer’s Church” (3-44), “Peace” (47-103), and “Church in a Revolutionary World” (107-167). Additionally, the four editors include their own “Introduction” (ix-xvi), which gives the biographical and theological background for these writings from the year 1966. Christian ethicists and theologians are in debt to Cascade Press, and to these four editors, for publishing these important lectures by the late John Howard Yoder.

A Note on the Editors’ “Introduction”

While the “Introduction” proves extremely helpful and informative for understanding the context of Yoder’s lectures, the four editors misguide their readers in terms of the virtues toward which Yoder points us. They claim that Yoder ends with concrete accounts of humility and patience: “The appropriate Christian response…is not pride but humility and patience, humility to acknowledge that the community of love is a gift from God, and patience to avoid identifying God’s deliverance with the rise and fall of regimes” (xv). This is not quite right. While Yoder uses the word “humility” in these writings, he uses it only to explain the moral and theological positions of his intellectual opponents. There are four instances where this is the case, and I outline each of them in

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1 I write this piece as an appreciative book review that goes beyond the bounds of a typical book review, both in its content and in its length, and criticizes the editorial introduction (not written by the author of the book but by four editors) and makes clear the premises and conclusions of John Howard Yoder’s moral reasoning when he was 39 years old.

2 John Howard Yoder, Revolutionary Christianity: The 1966 South American Lectures, edited by Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012); citations will be given in the body of the text.

3 In the Conclusion of my first manuscript, Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues: Humility, Patience, Prudence (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), I turn to John Howard Yoder’s multiple understandings of the virtue of patience. Some readers of my book may wonder, ‘why did he not employ Yoder’s moral reasoning in order to develop the virtue of humility as well?’ My answer is: no matter how much scholars of Yoder’s work want to suggest that Yoder accounts for the virtue of humility, it simply is not part of his moral reasoning. So this book review – which closely inspects Yoder’s most recent (posthumous) publication – provides me with a significant opportunity to defend this claim.
the next section. After demonstrating how humility is an not a virtue recommended by John Howard Yoder, I explain and evaluate what he means by the virtues of hope and patience – at least, what he meant in the year 1966.

First, when describing failed attempts at serious moral discipline within the history of the church, Yoder says of Martin Bucer and the pietist tradition: “Martin Bucer in the sixteenth century and pietism in the seventeenth century attempted to restore something of…personal humility, confession, and assurance” (15). The key word in this passage is “attempted”; Yoder concludes that these attempts ended in failure, in terms of strict moral discipline within the church community, because it is too “personal” and not communal or social in practice and in scope.4

Second, when explaining the “simple logic when Jesus says of his disciples that his cross is to be the pattern of their life” (41), Yoder critiques any interpretation that reduces this “pattern” to the virtue of humility (see 41-42). To reduce this “pattern” to the virtue of humility is to take the radical edge off of Jesus’ command to his followers; Jesus “shares his cross with his disciples,” and they are commanded to participate “in the sufferings of Christ” (41-42). Yoder’s problem is that humility suggests mere humanly dispositions without necessitating the more radical or “revolutionary” actions of carrying the cross and suffering as Christ suffered.

Third, and the most complicated of the four, Yoder uses the word “humility” positively but not in terms of a virtue-centered reasoning. In the context of a Christian critique of the United States of America, Yoder writes:

Secrecy and deceit are a form of slavery. The United States’ experience of the last few years has frequently demonstrated that governmental secret intelligence agencies have been a major source of misinformation. Jesus says that transparency and humility are tests of truth and that it suffices to say ‘yes’ for yes and ‘nay’ for nay. Social experience confirms the same point. The liar fools himself first (97).

Yoder does not posit humility as a virtue in this passage; rather, somewhat awkwardly, humility and transparency becomes Jesus’ solution to the tendency within worldly politics to cover up information. The implications of this solution, however, do not sound like Christian discipline; the content of Yoder’s words and tone suggest that Christians are morally superior to the CIA and FBI because they do not cover up political information. Christians make their claims public; they assert themselves and tell the world what they know to be true. Once Yoder’s argument is spelled out, it actually runs counter to humility – as a virtue – because Christians do not act with humility when...

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4 Yoder dismisses Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, and psychoanalysis for allowing and promoting forgiveness to remain at a “personal” level. Bucer’s particular argument is that humility is required for the confessing sinner to name their sins of forgiveness in the act of confession. Yoder promotes “social forgiveness” over and against “personal forgiveness” but does not tell his readers/listeners what virtues are required for obtaining forgiveness at the ecclesial/social level.
asserting themselves. Humility simply becomes a weapon used in response to those who keep political secrets.

Fourth, Yoder argues against “socially conservative religious groups” who suggest that either “(a) the gospel deals only with personal ethics and not social structures,” or “(b) that the only way [the gospel] deals with social structures is by changing the heart of the man in power and permitting him to exercise his control with greater humility or insight” (132). Yoder clearly resists any interpretation of the Gospel that suggests Christians need to exercise the virtue of humility in an effort to “deal with social structures.” As we will learn later, while attending to more details of “Church in a Revolutionary World,” the editors are correct that patience is required for dealing “with social structures”; yet, as Yoder claims here, humility is not required for such a daunting task.

In *Revolutionary Christianity*, humility is not a virtue recommended by John Howard Yoder.\(^5\) His primary concerns are: (a) that the Gospel gets reduced to the virtue of humility or (b) the virtue of humility gets used as a justification for exercising control and power – i.e. as in a just war theory that claims a ruler is justified in going to war if the ruler displays particular virtues, such as humility.\(^6\) John Howard Yoder recommends humility as a tactic, rather than as a virtue, because it is useful only in response to secret-keepers and not primarily as an indispensable virtue for Christian discipleship.

**Hope and Patience in John Howard Yoder’s *Revolutionary Christianity***

The chapters gathered under the title of “The Believer’s Church” argue that the Anabaptist movement, “the free church,” provides the best institutional basis for remaining faithful to Jesus Christ. The editors describe the consistent logic found in the section called “The Believer’s Church” as follows:

Yoder systematically argues that only the free church can (a) offer true religious liberty and maintain its missionary character over the generations, (b) restore the

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\(^5\) For those readers interested in whether Yoder defends humility as a virtue in his other writings, the most concrete discussion on it (that I find) is in (also a posthumous publication) Yoder’s *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, with an “Introduction” by Stanley Hauerwas & Alex Sider, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 79-90. In his commentary on Philippians 2, Yoder promotes humility as a “disposition” – which we may infer also means a virtue. Yoder goes further than this, however, and defends the “Christian disposition” of humility to turn into “humiliation”: “because he [Jesus Christ] was humiliated we should accept humiliation.” Yoder continues, “Paul pleads with the Philippians to be more united. In order to be more unity you have to respect the other person. The reason you should be able to respect the other person is that Christ humiliated himself. The example of Christ is a norm for you Christians in Phillipi. Although the pattern of humiliation unto death is unique (none of us have yet died), and although the exaltation and title of the Lord is unique (none of us have yet ascended), this pattern is still a norm for us [today]. We are still called to share in that humiliation, in that servanthood” (87-88). It is difficult to imagine any virtue theory, which seeks to find the mean between two extremes, to allow for or encourage humiliation as a virtue.

\(^6\) For instance: Martin Luther recommends “fear,” directed toward God, and “humility,” directed toward oneself, as the two dispositions required for waging a just war.
real person-to-person character of forgiveness among believers and, because of this, (c) call all people to live together in a community of mutual respect and to reorder their society in a truly human way (xii-xiii).

With this summary, the editors capture the tone of the first four chapters – especially their use of the word “only”: for Yoder, the free church alone makes it possible to follow Jesus faithfully within a fallen world and in relation to the fallen churches (Roman Catholicism and the churches of the Magisterial Reformation). The free church alone offers a “revolutionary Christianity.”

The chapters gathered under the title of “Peace,” as well as the chapters gathered under the title of “Church in a Revolutionary World,” defend (albeit in different ways) the following claim by Yoder—which serves as the final paragraph in the collection:

There is no greater contribution that can be made by the tiny people of God in the revolution of our age than to be that people, both separate from the world and identified with its needs, both the soul of society (without which it cannot live) and its conscience (with which it cannot be at peace). We can look to the future to dream of a time when “the home of God is among mortals” only because in the congregation of believers [the free church] it is already true (167, emphasis added).

The final section of Revolutionary Christianity gives us an account of the virtues of hope and patience (but not humility). In Chapter 10, “The Otherness of the Church” (107-119), Yoder presents us with his understanding of the virtue of patience. In the most important passage from this chapter, Yoder claims:

If we confess the Holy Spirit and the church with the apostles, we must further recognize that unbelief also incarnates itself. The world must return to the place in our theology that God’s patience has given it in history. World is neither all nature nor all humanity; it is the structuredness of unbelief. It is not a neutral realm in which good and evil have equal chances nor is it the sum total of everything outside [of] ourselves (115).

Yoder offers an Augustinian account of the virtue of patience, which conforms with the Augustinian tone pervasive throughout this chapter. For Augustine, the virtues are given by God (“supernatural” virtues) and directed back toward God. In light of this account of the virtues, Yoder reasons in this passage that, because God acts with patience within history, we ought to act with patience in our engagements within the world. The world is not “neutral”; rather, it is structured by “unbelief” and not by “evil.” While we need to display patience in our engagement with the world, and with others within the world, our patience cannot and should not be understood on the world’s terms because patience is directed back toward God. As a structure of “unbelief,” the world does not know and will not understand what the patience of “revolutionary Christianity” looks like.
As far as non-revolutionary religion (Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism) is concerned, Yoder reasons that moral agents in these traditions are given the virtue of patience but fail to exercise it. The traditional theatrical metaphors of virtue theory heavily determine Yoder’s judgments in these early writings: some moral agents might possess the virtues, but the real goal is to display the virtues. The difference between “Revolutionary Christianity” and non-revolutionary religion is that the former possesses and exhibits patience whereas the latter only possesses it but never shows evidence of being patient. This means that Yoder provides his readers with a way to divide up the world:

A) God’s People – Anabaptists/Participants in the Radical Reformation:
   Given the Virtues by God, Possess the Virtues, and Exercise the Virtues

B) God’s People – Jews, Roman Catholics, Participants in the Magisterial Reformation: Given the Virtues by God, Possess the Virtues, but Do Not Exercise the Virtues

C) The World – The Structure of “Unbelief”: Either Non-Virtuous or Vicious but not “Evil”

The upshot of Yoder’s scheme is that he does not consistently employ terms such as “real” or “true” for describing Christians and Jews (such as “the true Church”). The limitation of Yoder’s scheme is that it is too clear and distinct, like Augustinian moral reasoning, concerning who receives the gift of virtue and who exercises the virtues. In response to Yoder, we need a Thomistic correction where “natural” virtues become possible in a world structured by “unbelief.” Both the natural and supernatural virtues can be “put on,” as Jennifer Herdt so aptly describes it.

In addition to the Thomist correction of Yoder’s moral reasoning, we also could employ a Kierkegaardian reply to Yoder where the category of “concealment” provides a reason for why some Christians possess but do not exercise the virtues. Part of the reason for this lack of “putting on” patience, for Kierkegaard, is a humble lack of confidence in ourselves – as sinners – that we can and will display “God’s patience” in ways that truly honor God’s intentions and serve as a proper witness to God’s ways with

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7 The one exception that I find is: “The church that follows him most faithfully in that warfare whose weapons are not carnal but mighty will partake most truly in his triumph” (Yoder, *Revolutionary Christianity*, 118; emphasis added).

8 Yoder counters my point when he writes: “Therefore, the choice is between demanding of everyone: (a) a level of obedience and selflessness which only faith and forgiveness render meaningful…, and (b) lowering the requirements for everyone to a level where faith and forgiveness are not needed (the medieval [natural law] alternative). This dilemma is not part of the historical situation; it is an artificial construction springing from a failure to recognize the reality of the world” (Yoder, *Revolutionary Christianity*, 116).


the world. From this perspective, we should act as if we have been given the virtues without knowing whether or not we actually possess them. Our uncertainty leads us to forms of “anxiety” (Kierkegaard’s word) about the status of our virtues, and we should conceal the virtues if we lack confidence in representing God within the world.11

In Chapter 12, “Constantinianism Old and New” (135-145), Yoder presents us with several different forms of Constantinianism. Typically, Yoder’s solution to the problem of Constantinianism is an unapologetic Christian pacifism. In this chapter, however, his solution becomes the virtue of hope.

The main point of “Constantinianism Old and New” is to break “the link between our obedience and expected results” (141). Yoder’s questioning of efficiency, or cause-and-effect relationships, is not new within the history of philosophy: the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, too, raised a serious amount of doubt concerning our knowledge of how action \( a \) leads to result \( b \). In my judgment, Yoder’s constant questioning that Christian moral actions ought to have good results within the world echoes much of Hume’s own skepticism about causation in general. For Hume, in terms of moral reasoning, we should stick with our dispositions and not worry about the results of our actions because we have no way to know the actual relationship between our actions and their consequences.12

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12 For example, I might push someone down in order to get into a Best Buy before they do on the day after Thanksgiving (the American holiday of “Thanksgiving” – a day of giving thanks and showing gratitude – is ironically and problematically followed by the most greedy day of American culture, often called “Black Friday”). From David Hume’s perspective, I experience my own greed and impatience; others experience, as witnesses, the action of my putting hands on someone else; and still others experience (probably the same people) that person falling down. However, it would be too much to say that my greed and impatience caused the other person to fall down because we have no way to experience the causation between these events: event A being my dispositional state and event B being the person in front of me falling down. Hume’s moral solution to these tricky ethical situations is found through his specification of sympathy as what our primary character disposition ought to be, and this is where Hume’s and Yoder’s moral reasoning part ways: Yoder specifies hope as the primary Christian virtue. For Yoder, the virtue of hope displays the obedience that is necessary for living the Christian life. However, it cannot be said that obedience – as portrayed in the virtue of hope – leads to a certain kind of result. I might refuse to tackle someone in order to prevent a touchdown during an American football game. From Yoder’s perspective, I experience my own intention to obey God by not violently hitting another player; others experience, as witnesses, my inaction of not using my body as a spear to tackle the player carrying the football (probably the coach and other defensive players); still, others experience (probably the spectators) that player scoring a touchdown. However, it would be too much to say that my obedience toward God allowed or caused the other person to score a touchdown because we have no way to experience the causation between these events. We simply make an inference, which cannot be proven, that my obedience through the exhibition of the virtue of hope allowed for the other player to score a touchdown. In other words: Yoder displays Humean skepticism toward our knowledge of causation but turns to the virtue of hope, instead of the virtue of sympathy, to articulate what our dispositional nature ought to be once we recognize that we are truly “out-of-control” when it comes to the consequences of our actions.
The vices that hope opposes are despair and indifference, which can be found in other virtue theories, and Yoder adds the vice of pride as well:

If we were to justify our behavior on the basis of its promised social effect, this would drive us into pride and the abuse of power at those points where we achieve the goals we set and into resignation and withdrawal [despair and indifference] at those points where we are unable to dominate (141).

Traditionally, the virtue that opposes pride is humility. We established earlier, however, that Yoder does not think humility is a Christian virtue. Yoder, instead, thinks that hope is the virtue that opposes pride. Basically, Yoder reasons in this way: when our actions lead to success, this success encourages the vice of pride; when our actions lead to failure, this failure nurtures despair and/or indifference. Should we correct our tendencies when dealing with success or failure? No: we ought to stop thinking that our actions lead anywhere at all! We need to quit thinking in terms of causality — that is, that the content of our actions matter because of their consequences.

Yoder’s argument that hope is the reason for Christian obedience to God displays his virtue-centered reasoning. Aristotle, for instance, claims that courage is the reason for acting when fearful. Instead of focusing on the natural feeling of fear, Yoder’s argument hinges on obedience to a supernatural (though not distant) God who becomes incarnate in the Jewish flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.

He outlines six ways in which hope is a virtue. First, to display the virtue of hope means to risk the following practices: to care for “the hopelessly ill,” to care for “the mentally handicapped” for whom the world assumes live without hope, and to care for “the unproductive aged” who the world directs hopelessness toward (see 141). The practice that manifests hope in the most concrete way is footwashing, which demonstrates “a posture in the world” that has no possibility of being interpreted in terms of “economic usefulness” or a “statistical formula.” Usually, we think that footwashing displays the virtue of humility — lowering oneself to the filth of the foot of the other; Yoder, however, argues that this practice requires the virtue of hope because there is neither a consequential nor efficient reason for participating in such a practice.

Second, the virtue of hope comes with a sense of “wonder”:

[A] discerning Christian description of history would find much more unexplainable – Christians would call them providential – coincidences at crucial turning points. Often, the brilliant solutions, the courageous resistances, and the reconciling initiatives have not been the result of strategic scheming but have been given by the situation in way that is a surprise, a revelation, ‘a wonder in our eyes’ [Mark 12:11] (142).

Philosophy begins with a sense of “wonder” that ultimately leads to learning how to love wisdom. In order to learn to love wisdom, philosophy encourages us to live the good life based on self-reflection and virtue. In his reflections on hope, Yoder reasons in a very similar way to Ancient Greek philosophers. Instead of prudence as the primary intellectual virtue, however, Yoder renders the primary intellectual virtue as hope. How wonderful!

Third, in order to exercise the virtue of hope there needs to be an “unmasking [of] idols” (142). A Christian moral agent might possess the virtue of hope, but it cannot be exercised until that Christian removes all idolatry from his or her life – even at the societal level. Yoder writes:

There are times when a society is so sweepingly under the control of an ideology that its greatest need is for someone to find a point at which that individual will say a clear ‘no’ on the ground of a commitment to a higher loyalty (142).

Yoder introduces another virtue in this passage and connects it with hope: loyalty. Our higher loyalties ought to call our lower loyalties into question. Here, Yoder has in mind how the Christian’s commitment to the Church takes precedence over the Christian’s commitment to the nation-state. This prioritization requires particular dispositions, and Yoder identifies these dispositions as manifest in the virtues of hope and loyalty.

Fourth, the virtue of hope allows us to have a disposition within the world as risk-takers – even when taking risks lead to failure. Yoder describes several ways in which the Church takes risks in starting different activities and organizations, and he concludes by reflecting on the difference that the virtue of hope makes for both congregations and state agencies who risk failure: “unlike government agencies, [hope allows a church community] to take the risk of failure” (143). Yoder’s point here is that the disposition of hopefulness, not the consequences of the risky decision, is what matters most for the Church to be that community which takes risks within the world.

Fifth, the virtue of hope serves as a “spring in the desert” for those wandering in the desert of the world. Yoder’s metaphor works this way:

If water can be found in the desert country, it is because at some unknown and unseen distant place, unmeasured amounts of water soaked into the soil and were lost. Water can be found as a nearly miraculous source of sustenance in a desert only because it seeped away in some distant place over a long enough period of time to create pressure in the veins of porous rock that drove it all the way to the place of its appearance. So it is with the deeds of Christian obedience. Lost into the earth, seeping away unseen and uncounted, they contribute to the building up of pressures, creating an underground reservoir of healing and quickening power which can be drawn on at the point of a person’s greatest thirst. The social scientist would speak here about the creation of mores or the development of public opinion to raise the general level of one’s capacity for unselfish behavior. These are simply other ways of affirming that the connection between my
obedience and the fulfillment of God’s purposes must include my losing track of my own effectiveness, in the larger reservoir of loving pressures (143-144; emphasis added).

Yoder finds family resemblance between what the social scientist affirms as “the creation of mores or the development of public opinion” and the virtue of hope within the Christian tradition. This likeness is significant because it allows for a version of secularized hope within Yoder’s moral reasoning. The hope that is displayed in terms of “the deeds of Christian obedience,” however, remains more hopeful for those who find themselves wandering in the desert of the world on Yoder’s standards.

Sixth, taking the previous metaphor one step further, the virtue of hope is best described as a mirage, not as a hallucination. The object of hope “is still really there and still straight ahead as the ultimate goal” even if the “traveler will not reach that goal as soon as it seems that she should” (144). Yoder continues, “[B]ut what she sees ahead is of the same shape and character and in the same direction as the reality of…her ultimate destination” (144). This is not a hallucination because it is “real.” Because of its reality, the effort is justified by the vision of that city on a hill to which God will call all nations to learn the law of the Lord together in the last days and to forge their weapons of war into gardening tools. We do not pilgrimage toward the holy city because we can get there on our own power but because we want to be the kind of persons and community who will not be out of place there when God brings Jerusalem down to us from heaven (144; emphasis added).

According to Yoder, Christians “want to be the kind of persons and community who will not be out of place” (144). This signifies the aspect of expectation that comes with the virtue of hope. To be hopeful is to expect to arrive at a “place” where God will be as well; being hopeful (and patient) will insure that you belong to that “place” once you (plural) arrive there.

Conclusion

Why be virtuous at all? According to Yoder, Christians exercise the virtues – particularly hope and patience – because that is the kind of people that Christians want to be.14 Why do hope and patience make Christianity “revolutionary”? According to Yoder, because those Christians who receive the gifts of hope and patience also exercise these virtues in the context of the world – this world – which remains a difficult task. Revolutions are difficult. If we do not agree with this depiction of “revolutionary,” then

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14 Scott Davis writes, “Hope without faith is unreasonable; hope and faith without charity can become demonic” (Davis, Warcraft and the Fragility of Virtue, 77). If this insight is right, and I think that it is, then the current task of Yoder scholars should concern explaining the role of “faith” and “charity” in Yoder’s virtue-centered reasoning.
Yoder claims that we need to re-shape our imaginations concerning what we mean by “revolutionary”: to be revolutionary is not to get-what-you-want through manipulation and violence; to be revolutionary is to be hopeful and patient so that once you get where you are going there is a sense of accomplishment and belonging.\textsuperscript{15}

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