The Feminist-Christian Schism Revisited

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What do feminist theologies have to do with John Howard Yoder’s *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*? Given that Yoder’s aim is to challenge the inevitability of the Jewish and Christian split and to highlight the “Jewishness of the free church vision,”2 this question may seem odd. After all, Yoder did not identify as a feminist theologian. Nor did he really engage feminist theologies. Apart from brief discussion of Rosemary Radford Ruether’s analysis of Jewish-Christian relations3 and a few references to “liberation theologies,”4 Yoder certainly does not focus on feminism in this particular work. It seems that feminist theologies are simply irrelevant to *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*.

Yet, upon closer inspection, they are anything but. Yoder’s treatment of the Jewish-Christian schism parallels that of “feminism.” Here he argues that the separation of Judaism and Christianity “did not have to be.”5 In *The Priestly Kingdom*, he reiterates this claim and adds an identical one about feminism. “I should like to begin,” Yoder writes, “with the betrayal of the Jewishness of the early church…or with the betrayal of the feminist thrust that had begun with the Gospels.”6 Yoder thus identifies both the church’s denial of its Jewishness and its abandonment of feminism as instances of the church “going astray” from the faithful embodiment of its mission.7 Both require a “looping back…to enable a midcourse correction.”8 Unfortunately, he does not devote the same level of attention to his claims vis-à-vis feminism as he does to Judaism—what a joy it would have been to read Yoder’s *The Feminist-Christian Schism Revisited!*—but his existing work offers clues as to what his “feminist free church vision” might entail. The connection between Yoder’s claims about the church’s separation from Judaism and its abandonment of feminism also invites consideration of whether the kind of dialogue commentator Peter Ochs credits Yoder’s work for initiating between postliberal Jews and

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1 I would like to thank Mark Thiessen Nation, Jacob Goodson, and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful feedback.


3 Ibid., 55, 97.


5 Ibid., 43.


7 Ibid.

8 *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 69.
Christians might also result between postliberals and feminists in both traditions. Indeed, Yoder’s reference to feminism is especially striking given the often less-than-enthusiastic reception contemporary postliberals and feminists give each other’s work.

I argue that Yoder’s own interest in feminism indicates that contemporary postliberal accounts that ignore feminist theologies will continue to neglect key components of Yoder’s theological legacy, and that contemporary feminist theologies—without doing so in any intentional way—may be providing the most powerful articulation of parts of Yoder’s free church vision. I begin this argument with brief comments on the “wonders” and “burdens” of Yoder’s work (of which *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* is but one part) in relation to feminism. I then argue that versions of several problems Yoder identifies in the standard account of the Jewish-Christian schism also appear in some prominent postliberal accounts of Christian feminisms. These problems include a failure to appreciate the diversity of the tradition, the subsequent construction of normative categories that dismiss this diversity as foreign to the tradition, and a neglect of the full range of the political vision Yoder identifies at the heart of the church’s mission. These problems obscure what Yoder might call “overlapping interests” between his radical reformation vision and those of feminist theologians whose views of the identity, moral character, and mission of the church often include decentralized, un-hierarchical communities gathered around a text, resistance to violence in all its forms, and an understanding of the mission of the church as countercultural witness. I offer this analysis in hope that it invites “mutually enriching dialogue” among contemporary Christian feminists and postliberals on the identity and mission of the church.

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9 I will focus on the possibilities of such conversation between postliberal and feminist Christians.

10 See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110; and Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 51. To my knowledge, Yoder did not explicitly identify as a postliberal theologian. But his critiques of Reinhold Niebuhr along with the priority he places on revelation, biblical realism, the embodied practices of the church community, and ecumenical concerns endear him to contemporary postliberals, some of whom claim Yoder as a major influence.

11 I borrow this language from Peter Ochs’s commentary in *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 38.

12 As I will discuss presently, “postliberalism,” like “feminist theologies,” is a category that includes a wide and diverse range of theological work. I cannot pretend to do justice here to the rich variety of either approach. I have in mind only those postliberal accounts that summarily dismiss feminist theologies as versions of liberalism and therefore not worthy of constructive engagement.


14 Ibid., 120.
John Howard Yoder and the Feminist Tradition

When one thinks of Yoder’s work, feminist theologies are not the first things that come to mind. Yoder devoted most of his scholarly energies to articulating the pacifist imperative of the Gospel and proclaiming this radical reformation vision as normative for all Christians (and, as *Jewish-Christian Schism* argues, as originating in and consonant with exilic Judaism). He does not substantially engage feminist work. Nor have many feminists engaged his. Those who have identify Yoder’s interpretation of “revolutionary subordination” as a stumbling block for feminist and womanist theologies. To make matters more complicated, Yoder’s perpetration of sexual offenses against a number of women threatens to end the conversation before it even begins.

Despite these obstacles, “feminism” is a concern of Yoder’s work. Yoder describes as “feminist” a major component of what he regards as the church’s political

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15 To my knowledge, the only major feminist scholars Yoder engages are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (in *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972)) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997); and *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*).


identity: the social egalitarianism of the early church. He mentions “feminism” along with hospitals, service of the poor, generalized education, egalitarianism, and abolitionism as examples of cultures that Christians created. And he authored two unpublished memos on “feminist theology” where he not only argues for the centrality of gender egalitarianism to Jesus’s ministry but also identifies Jesus as a feminist. A close reading of these memos reveals the significance of feminism to Yoder’s account of Christian politics.

In the first memo, “Feminist Theology Miscellany #1: Salvation Through Mothering?,” Yoder challenges the literal interpretation of I Timothy 2:15, which reads, “Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” Rejecting the individualist conception of salvation that underlies this interpretation, Yoder identifies the Fall as a “fall into patriarchy” and then argues that the restoration of matriarchy constitutes the meaning of salvation. “It is that fallenness,” he writes, “which is in the process of being set right when we are told that restored wholeness (salvation) will come about through mothering.” By ‘mothering’ Yoder means not biological child birth and/or the nurturing of children, but a certain mode of being in the world marked by “feminine” qualities:

When measured by the understandings of human dignity propagated by our dominant cultures, the traits we are taught to call ‘feminine’ are closer to the way of life that Jesus taught and exemplified than are those which we are taught to consider ‘masculine.’ The God of whom Jesus speaks in the gospels, although

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18 Priestly Kingdom, 73. Yoder also discusses the gender egalitarianism of the early church in a sermon he preached on 1 Corinthians 11 in 1969, now published as “Embracing Equality” in Real Christian Fellowship by John Howard Yoder and John C. Nugent, Branson L. Parler, and Heather L. Bunce, eds. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2014), 96-108. Thanks to Mark Thiessen Nation for bringing this essay to my attention.


20 Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow identifies “Jesus was a feminist” claims as one of three major forms of anti-Judaism present in Christian feminisms. She argues that feminist efforts to claim Jesus for their cause often require a negative depiction of the Judaism of Jesus’s time. Given Yoder’s own approach to the Jewish-Christian schism, it is safe to say that Yoder would agree with Plaskow when she says that “whatever Jesus’ attitudes towards women, they represent not a victory over Judaism but a possibility within early Judaism.” See “Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God,” Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 7 (Fall 1991): 99-108.


22 Ibid., 6.

23 Ibid.
called ‘papa,’ is no patriarch...Take any contemporary schema of gender style stereotypes: authority versus compassion, rationality versus relatedness, manipulation versus interaction, distancing versus identification...regularly you will find that Jesus himself, and what he asks of his followers (including the males among them), and the style of mutual love which Peter and Paul and James ask for in the later church, are qualities which stand in the ‘feminine’ column of the list.24

In this passage Yoder identifies ‘mothering’ as central to the church’s calling. Followers of Jesus are to be compassionate, relational, interactive, sympathetic, and engaged in mutual love. In short, they are to be what convention defines as essentially “feminine.”25 Yoder elaborates on the idea of ‘mothering’ as an alternative mode of living and discusses Jesus’s own embodiment of these ‘feminine’ qualities in the second memo.

In “Feminist Theology Miscellany #2: What Kind of Feminist Was Jesus?”—note that the title already describes Jesus as feminist and proceeds to determine which kind—Yoder examines several key Gospel passages that describe Jesus’s interactions with women.26 These readings reveal that “Jesus did not merely accept women as full human beings in his dealings with them, without discriminating against them as the normal practices of the time would have called him to do,”27 but that “both women and men received his independent attention as objects of ministry. Women were no less worthy than men of being dealt with, spoken with, healed, taught.”28 Yoder concludes from his study of the gospels,

not simply that Jesus does not discriminate, that he considers women and men equally to be persons worthy of his esteem. He goes beyond that and is specifically accessible and generous beyond the line of duty to women at points of specific sex-related discrimination. To use modern language: he is not simply nondiscriminatory. He takes affirmative action.29

24 Ibid.
26 John Howard Yoder, “Feminist Theology Miscellany #2: What Kind of Feminist Was Jesus?” (October 1990), 1-4. (Underlining original.)
27 Ibid., 1.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 2-3.
Here again, Yoder interprets Jesus’s mission as a turning of the cultural—specifically, gendered—tables. Not only does the Christian calling require the embodiment of a certain ‘feminine’ way of life, as we saw in Yoder’s readings of I Timothy, but so too does it involve practices that disrupt the dominant culture’s treatment of women. Jesus’s practice of affirming women’s full dignity as persons challenges the unjust practices of the wider culture and, in doing so, reveals part of the church’s mission.

Yoder’s own feminist theological reflections and his references to feminism suggest an important relationship between feminist theologies and Yoder’s radical reformation vision. At the very least, these memos provide a fuller description of Yoder’s account of Christian politics. But attention to Yoder’s “feminist free church vision” also holds the potential to enliven conversation among contemporary Christian postliberals and feminists. Perhaps even more importantly, Yoder’s feminist theological reflections suggest that contemporary postliberal accounts cannot afford to ignore feminist theologies if their goal is the continuation and development of Yoder’s theological legacy. Contemporary feminist theologies may prove indispensable to developing Yoder’s free church vision.

**Postliberal-Feminist Dialogue**

The current state of dialogue between postliberals and feminists often leaves much to be desired. No doubt the paucity of engagement is due partly to these theologians’ often contrasting theological agendas. But the relationship also owes much to the larger tension between postliberal and liberal theologies, to which certain types of feminist theology belong. As Ochs indicates, postliberal theologians define their work, in part, over and against a theological liberalism they see as implicated in modern Western forms of secular reasoning in favor of a return to tradition-based forms of reasoning. Following George Lindbeck’s attention to Christianity as a cultural-linguistic system, much postliberal work features a concern for exploring and preserving the distinctive integrity of Christian narratives, practices, and doctrines. Although the term postliberal encompasses a broad range of theological work, postliberal theologies often take the work of Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and Karl Barth as points of departure and feature

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34 As John Webster notes, postliberalism is less a “school” or a “position” than a “set of projects.” See “Theology after Liberalism?” in *Theology After Liberalism: A Reader*, eds. John Webster and George P. Schner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 58.
interests not only in traditional Christian doctrines and practices, but also in ecumenical issues and non-historical-critical forms of biblical interpretation.\textsuperscript{35} While postliberal influence can be seen in projects as wide-ranging as those of the various theologians of the so-called “Yale School” to Radical Orthodoxy and Scriptural Reasoning, this paper is most concerned with those versions of postliberalism prominent in the field of Christian ethics where Yoder’s influence remains strong.

As with postliberal theologies, it is difficult to do justice to the sheer diversity of approaches that comprise feminist theology. It would of course be inaccurate to say that feminist theologians do not share with their postliberal colleagues an interest in Christian scripture, practices, and doctrine, but feminist theologians (only some of whom identify as theological liberals) tend to focus less on maintaining Christian distinctiveness and more on critical-constructive retrievals of the tradition in light of redemptive possibilities for women and others on the margins. Their shared emphasis on God’s preferential option for the marginalized and on a prophetic concern for justice often takes precedence over efforts to preserve traditional formulations of Christian doctrine. Generally speaking, feminist theologians also take more appreciative and collaborative stances towards feminist theory and other secular disciplines for their critical value in naming and challenging injustice (both within and outside the Christian tradition) and in understanding the complex inter-workings of religion, politics, and culture. Their attention to the role of power in the construction of tradition and the ways theology is informed by a multiplicity of cultural identities, subjectivities, and social locations constitute some of their significant contributions.

Of course, this is not to say that feminist and postliberal theologies have nothing in common. Nor is it to deny that some theologians’ work reflects both approaches. It remains the case, however, that few postliberals committed to Yoder’s legacy have given feminism the substantive attention it deserves, and few feminists have engaged Yoder’s work. There are of course notable exceptions, including but not limited to Mark Thiessen Nation’s engagement with feminism and Cynthia Hess’s engagement with Yoder’s theology.\textsuperscript{36} I also do not doubt that most scholars of Yoder’s work are committed in practice to the gender egalitarianism detailed in his theology. I simply call attention to the relative lack of scholarly development of this aspect of Yoder’s pacifist politics as compared with other parts of his theology. Yoder’s own sympathies with both postliberalism and feminism suggest the possibility of a more productive relationship between these strands of the tradition. While feminist theologies may well be guilty of the same tendencies I discuss in what follows, I focus for the purposes of this essay on

\textsuperscript{35} DeHart, \textit{Trial of the Witnesses}, 46-51.

contemporary postliberal theologies that self-consciously embrace Yoder’s legacy but neglect feminist theologies.\textsuperscript{37}

**Parallel Problems**

Some of the problems Yoder identifies in accounts of the Jewish-Christian schism also appear in certain postliberal treatments of feminism. Yoder identifies three problems in particular that apply equally well to the postliberal-feminist relationship. The first includes a failure to recognize the diversity and thus the capaciousness of the traditions in question. The second involves the construction of normative categories that dictate what counts as internal or external to traditions. The third is a failure to appreciate, in its expansiveness, the vision of ecclesial politics Yoder describes. Attention to these parallels not only identifies points of divergence that often exist between Yoder and his postliberal successors, but also reveals significant “overlapping circles” \textsuperscript{38} between the work of Yoder and a number of feminist theologians.

**The Diversity Problem**

For Yoder, recognizing the diversity internal to Jewish and Christian traditions during the first centuries undermines the mistaken view that Judaism and Christianity existed in mutual exclusion. He rejects the standard account which views the Jewish-Christian split as an inevitable product of two different sets of answers to the question about God.\textsuperscript{39} Christianity and Judaism need not have gone their separate ways because Judaism was capacious enough to include the diverse views that later become identified as exclusively Christian. As Yoder puts it, “Jewry as a population was a great number of very diverse people. Their ‘convictions’ were scattered across a broad and messy spectrum.”\textsuperscript{40} No belief or practice existing among Jewish and Christian communities required their division. According to Yoder, “Each of the two major streams was torn by ‘internal’ divisions just as fundamental as the difference between them.”\textsuperscript{41} To view certain developments that later come to be identified as “Christian” as deviations from

\textsuperscript{37} Stanley Hauerwas, for example, acknowledges that he can be “rightly criticized for not writing about the challenges raised by feminism.” See Stanley Hauerwas, “Remembering How and What I Think: Response to the JRE Articles on Hauerwas,” Journal of Religious Ethics 40:2 (2012): 302.

\textsuperscript{38} Jewish-Christian Schism, 69.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 61.
“Judaism” fails to do justice to the diversity internal to both communities as well as the shared convictions that span those differences.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite Yoder’s own concern for emphasizing the internal richness of the Jewish tradition, many of his postliberal contemporaries tend to gloss over such diversity when it comes to feminist theologies. Just as more diversity obtains to the Jewish tradition than standard accounts of the schism (or even Yoder’s account of Judaism) allow, more diversity obtains to Christian feminism than certain postliberal accounts suggest. Rather than exploring this diversity, postliberal accounts often identify feminist theologies narrowly with theological liberalism.\textsuperscript{43} As one theologian puts it, “My difficulty with much feminist theology is, in short, not that it is feminist, but that it is so often liberal Protestant theology in a different key.”\textsuperscript{44} While such claims rightly acknowledge the status of some feminist theologies as varieties of theological liberalism, they also tend to under-appreciate the diversity of feminist approaches. Often one must look to footnotes to find any acknowledgment that non-liberal feminist theologies exist, and even then these theologies are sometimes dismissed as versions of modernism.\textsuperscript{45} To their credit, these accounts do often note exceptions to this characterization, but unfortunately the exceptions go unexplored. Apart from the failure of these accounts to consider the potential merits of liberal Christian feminism (or theological liberalism more generally), they ultimately give the impression that little diversity exists within Christian feminism and that any diversity that does exist finally collapses into the only similarity that matters.

It is striking how such approaches differ from Yoder’s own, not only in relation to feminism generally but also to liberalism. Yoder’s comparisons of “Jews and radical reformers” with “contemporary prophetic minority communities” and of “the classic ‘radical reformation’” with “current ‘liberative’” forms of Christianity suggest that, far from a threat to the integrity of the tradition, Yoder sees feminist theologies as sharing in his own project of reaching back to the root.\textsuperscript{46} He recognizes feminist projects as efforts to recover an original Christian witness, not an abandonment of traditional Christian belief and practice. He characterizes all of these movements as “criticisms of Christendom from within.”\textsuperscript{47} Even when Yoder discusses secular liberalism, he considers

\textsuperscript{42} Yoder’s attention to the internal diversity of Judaism may be useful in reading Yoder against himself to address some of the problems Ochs identifies with his portrayal of Judaism, including Yoder’s failure to acknowledge the existence of Judaisms other than the exilic version depicted in Jeremiah, as well as Gerald Schlabach’s criticisms of Yoder’s Christian supersessionism. See \textit{Jewish-Christian Schism}, 214.


\textsuperscript{45} Reno, “Feminist Theology as Modern Project,” 405, note 2.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Jewish-Christian Schism}, 45.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
its value and potential for collaboration with the Christian tradition. Yoder often suggests that practices that appear “external” to the Christian tradition usually possess “internal” precursors that are original to the tradition. In *Jewish-Christian Schism*, for example, he speaks of freedom of assembly, speech, and press as “external implications” of the “internal vision” of Puritan Christianity’s congregationalism and belief in the sovereignty of God’s word.\(^{48}\) Elsewhere he discusses egalitarianism in similar ways, arguing that although egalitarianism appears to be a product of the Enlightenment, the origins of its practice can be found much earlier among Christians who possess their own internal resources for the practice. Enlightenment egalitarianism serves a helpful function as it invites the church to re-articulate its own reasons for the practice.\(^{49}\) In still other places, Yoder speaks of Christians and non-Christians as “tactical allies” in their assumption of certain social practices.\(^{50}\) Yoder embraces similarities in practice as opportunities for collaboration rather than tools of exclusion. When it comes to non-Christian feminisms, or even Christian feminisms judged by postliberals to be too dependent on methods foreign to the Christian tradition, the evidence suggests that Yoder would explore the role these feminisms might nevertheless play in refocusing the church’s attention on its own distinctive grounds for feminist commitments.\(^{51}\)

In this sense, Yoder’s “missionary openness”\(^{52}\) looks more akin to that of certain feminists’ accounts of the church and Christian tradition than those of some prominent postliberals. Serene Jones’s image of the church as “a space of bounded openness”\(^{53}\) provides one such example. This image captures both the church’s identity as a community “distinguished by the specificity of its adorning practices and disciplines,” but also its identity as a community whose openness is “forever transgressing those boundaries in order to greet what is different from it” and whose practices “make the church’s sanctified borders fluid.”\(^{54}\) Yoder’s receptivity to alliances with liberal and secular versions of Christian practices also reveals affinities with Mary McClintock

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\(^{48}\) Ibid., 172-173.


\(^{50}\) *Priestly Kingdom*, 61.

\(^{51}\) As Yoder notes, the Enlightenment’s case for egalitarianism “only reinforces the importance of our clarifying that the New Testament has its own grounds for its own egalitarian witness, differently shaped from that of the Enlightenment, older and more deeply rooted, even though it has been lost and betrayed for centuries,” *Body Politics*, 40. For a similar argument about the importance of liberalism to postmodern theology, see Hyman, “Postmodern Theology and Modern Liberalism,” 470.

\(^{52}\) *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 126.


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 174. This description bears similarity to Chris K. Huebner’s discussion of Yoder’s conception of church as “the scattered body of Christ.” See *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 124-126.
Fulkerson’s study of Good Samaritan Methodist Church in Durham, NC, whose particularly Christian practices often take explicitly non-theological form.\(^{55}\) Both Yoder’s account of the “body politics” of the church and Fulkerson’s study of Christian practices at Good Samaritan reveal the ways Christian practices manage to be at once “distinctively Christian” and utterly “worldly.” Both of these theological projects present opportunities for further exploration into the ways contemporary feminist work across a variety of perspectives, while not intending as much, may nevertheless contribute meaningfully to the development of Yoder’s own project. This again suggests the importance of feminist theologies for those who self-consciously develop Yoder’s agenda.

*The Criteria Problem*

Postliberal failure to recognize the diversity of feminist theologies produces a related problem: the construction of a normative Christianity and a normative feminism that positions the latter external to the former. In Yoder’s assessment, the split between Judaism and Christianity requires the construction of a “normative” Judaism over and against which Christianity becomes defined. But “there was no such thing as normative Judaism in the first century of our era.”\(^{56}\) Neither Paul nor Jesus rejected Judaism, and neither Paul nor Jesus were rejected by it. Both hold views internal to a Judaism that possesses multiple authority structures, none of which constitutes “the” normative Judaism.\(^{57}\) Nor was faith in Jesus incompatible with Jewish identity. For longer than the standard account allows, “Jews” and “Christians” lived in “mutual compatibility.”\(^{58}\) What later became constructed as normative “Jewish” and “Christian” identities were merely internal diversities within Judaism. To read the present separation back where it did not exist not only distorts history but also stymies current possibilities for “our continuing search for who we want to be together.”\(^{59}\)

The tendency to construct a normative Judaism that does not include Christianity also has parallels in some postliberal accounts of feminist theology, where feminist theology becomes identified as a form of “modern theology” to “be rejected” for its use of methods foreign to the Christian tradition.\(^{60}\) Failure to appreciate the full diversity of


\(^{56}\) *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 47.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 48-49.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{60}\) Reno, “Feminist Theology as Modern Project,” 406.
feminist theologies enables the construction of a “conceptually pure” Christianity that has no room for feminism and a conceptually pure feminism that reduces all feminist theologies to misguided and externally-funded attacks on the tradition. Contrary to some postliberal claims that most feminist theologies employ quintessentially modern categories and criteria, Yoder indicates that he agrees with the “the basic stance” of feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s claims regarding the patriarchal corruption of early church tradition. Schüssler Fiorenza and a host of other feminists join Yoder in identifying Jesus as normative for Christian ethics. It is this very conviction that funds their assessment that “within a short time the emancipatory vision [of Jesus and the early church] was lost” and that shapes their understanding of the theological task as involving a retrieval of Christian origins.

But the similarities do not end with this early work in feminist theologies. Most contemporary feminists such as Jones, Fulkerson, and Elizabeth Johnson, to name a few, understand their work as originating from within the tradition. Indeed, some feminists note the shared “cultural-linguistic presuppositions” between postliberal and feminist theologians. Others draw attention to the variety of “internal” approaches feminists take to their theological work. Still others demonstrate that feminist concerns construed as “external,” such as justice, actually derive from the tradition itself and that, contrary to common accounts, feminist theologians regularly engage orthodox Christian themes. To construe all feminist theologies as radical departures from the approaches of postliberal theologies or as “external” threats to the integrity of a distinctive Christian tradition is to overlook these feminists’ confidence in the redemptive power of their religious tradition, the complex processes of culture, and the very nature of the theologian’s task.

The Pacifism Problem

The third problem shared by what Yoder identifies as the “standard account” of the Jewish-Christian schism and certain postliberal accounts of feminism involves the content of what Yoder understands to be the church’s pacifist witness. Of the numerous things Yoder identifies as lost in the Christian betrayal of its Jewishness is a proper understanding of its identity as a “not in charge” community gathered around a text with

62 Politics of Jesus, 190.
63 Ibid.
“distinctive moral commitments” and “non-hierarchical” leadership. Yoder locates the roots of radical reformation pacifism in the exilic Judaism of Jeremiah and details the similarities between his believer’s church vision and that of Judaism. Like Jewish communities in exile, the radical reformation churches renounce the Constantinian desire to rule and devote themselves to “seek[ing] the welfare of the city where I have sent you.” Their communities feature congregationalism, voluntary membership, relegation of civil control, and non-violence as well as “consensual decision-making, non-clerical ministry, reconciling discipline, communal economics, and love of enemy.” In short, both missionary communities constitute voluntary communities of dissent with decentralized religious authority that embody alternative social systems and thereby witness to the larger culture. The end of this “missionary openness” on the part of the Jews was, according to Yoder, a product of Christian history and not a rejection of the free church movement within Judaism. Tying his pacifist vision more closely to its origins in Judaism allows Yoder to provide a fuller picture of what such a community’s commitment to a pacifist witness entails.

Although Yoder makes clear that nonviolence is but one part of the church’s politics, he devotes much of his attention to this topic. Prominent postliberal accounts of the church as pacifist witness offer rich contributions to Yoder’s vision, but they tend to follow Yoder in focusing on the Christian counter-witness to the violence of the state. A number of feminist theologians suggest, however, that an overly narrow focus on the violence of war occludes other types of violence that demand attention. Feminists like Gloria Albrecht have called attention to the need for the church to address systemic violence related to race, gender, and class. Recent feminist work on the internal violence of trauma by Serene Jones and Cynthia Hess broadens our conceptions of the forms violence takes in the everyday lives of many. And womanist work, such as that of Emilie M. Townes, offers powerful analyses of “the cultural production” of evil that


68 Ibid., 184.

69 Ibid., 137.


demands resistance. The work of these and other feminists makes clear that a Christian witness of peace cannot be limited to resisting the violence of war.

Although Yoder devotes much of his attention to the rejection of state-wielded violence, his analysis of the Jewishness of the free church vision, as well as his references to the social egalitarianism of Jesus, provides a fuller account of what the pacifist politics of the church entails. Yoder explicitly identifies social egalitarianism as one component of Jesus’s own political vision. In addition to forgiveness, suffering, the sharing of economic resources, and the other new ways Jesus calls his disciples to live, he also “gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman…in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person.” As Yoder’s own feminist theological reflections indicate, the content of social egalitarianism looks something like ‘mothering,’ a way of life marked by certain “feminine” qualities of relating to others. And, as Yoder’s discussion of women’s ordination makes clear, social egalitarianism goes beyond the mere empowerment of women. The push for women’s ordination in contemporary Christian communities, while a step in the right direction, nevertheless misses the larger point: every person in the community should play a leadership role. Properly speaking, no one should be ordained. Or, more precisely, all are already ordained through baptism.

Again, here, so much early and contemporary feminist work seems to be pursuing an agenda Yoder would regard as consonant with his own. Ruether’s critiques of hierarchical leadership, for example, mirror Yoder’s call for a return to the anti-clericalism and decentralized authority structure of early Jewish and Christian communities. Her rejection of clericalism in favor of diaconia, or service, resembles Yoder’s contention that leadership in these communities should be marked by “consensual decision-making” and “a non-clerical ministry.” Similarly, her discussion of the Woman-Church movement and “feminist base communities” calls to mind Yoder’s convictions about the church as a counter-cultural community. Ruether sees feminist base communities as places where Christians committed to Jesus’s original emancipatory vision embody that vision and bring it “to bear on the institutionalized

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75 *Body Politics*, 60.
78 *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 137.
79 *Sexism and God-Talk*, 205.
Church.” Yoder himself draws a direct comparison between Jews, radical reformation Christians, and contemporary base communities. Like these communities, feminist base communities exist as alternative communities of the Word that witness to the larger church in the hope of its repentance and reform.

More contemporary feminist work also appears to be developing this aspect of Yoder’s pacifist vision. Womanist Marcia Y. Riggs, for example, levels trenchant critiques of the sexism in black churches. Why, she asks, do black churches so often lead the way in movements for justice, but fail to address gender justice? Nearly every womanist account of the black church discusses what Riggs calls the churches’ failure “to connect the dots between the quest for racial and economic justice with sexual-gender justice.” It seems to me that Yoder would characterize this work, along with other feminists’ attention to systemic and internal violence, as contributing in indispensable ways to the pacifist politics he identifies at the heart of Christian identity and mission.

**Conclusion**

Unfortunately, then, any neglect of these feminist theologies may distort rather than develop Yoder’s radical reformation vision. If Yoder’s reconsideration of Jewish-Christian relations affirms Judaism as a sister community from whom Christians have much to learn, it seems equally the case that he would view feminist theologies in a similar light. The fact that Yoder’s interest in feminism does not always appear in his successors’ accounts of Christian pacifism makes it all the more important that we consider Yoder’s own views on the issue. Yoder’s approach provides a model of engagement that enables the appreciation of feminist theologies as projects internal to the Christian tradition and that provides a more robust account of pacifism. Yoder’s own receptivity to feminism reveals that the “overlapping circles” he identifies among Jews, radical reformation Christians, and liberation theologies provides a constructive model for dialogue between postliberals and feminists. It may even call into question the helpfulness of the very categories “postliberal” and “feminist.”

Indeed, Yoder’s identification of feminism as one of many Christian “cultures” suggests a new “postliberal” approach to “feminist” theologies—one that understands, as he puts it, “that Christian identity itself calls for feminist engagement.” Just as Yoder argues that Judaism and Christianity do not exist in a mutually exclusive relationship, he also argues that feminism and Christianity are “intrinsically interlocked rather than

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80 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 80.
84 “Feminist Theology Miscellany #1,” 5.
merely mutually compatible.” This does not, of course, tell us anything that a variety of Christian feminists have not already been saying for decades about their work, but perhaps hearing as much from Yoder himself offers his postliberal students a renewed impetus to dialogue with their feminist brothers and sisters. It would be a mistake for those committed to Yoder’s legacy to ignore feminist theologies since the work of many feminist theologians, while certainly not attempting to do so in any intentional way, contributes meaningfully to Yoder’s own radical reformation project. In light of the renewed attention to Yoder’s failure to fully embody in his life the feminist ideals of his theology, it is even more pressing for postliberals to develop the feminist aspects of his pacifist politics.

Although I have focused here on the need for postliberals to better engage feminist theologies, it is also important that feminists not dismiss Yoder. It may be that the feminism of Yoder’s theology offers resources for the development of a Christian politics that postliberals and feminists alike can identify as central to the church’s identity and mission. Feminists have in Yoder’s theology a strategically placed postliberal ally that rebuffs the standard postliberal dismissals of feminist theologies.

At the very least, the “overlapping circles” that Yoder pinpoints as present in the free church vision and feminism calls for a more generous and collaborative engagement between the two approaches. I do not mean to suggest that there are not real differences between the varieties of postliberal and feminist approaches. As Ochs notes, real dialogue presumes difference. But whatever else may separate Christian postliberalism and feminism, it is clear that Yoder would consider the possibilities for mutual enrichment between them. Collaborative dialogue among postliberals and feminists would certainly be consonant with what Yoder describes as the early church’s “reconciling message.”

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85 Ibid., 5.
86 Jewish-Christian Schism, 150.