THE NEW YODER

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2. *The discipline of the church body.* How might we develop en-
spirited disciplines that empower without becoming "disciplinary" in the pejorative senses of this word we have identified quite well?

3. *The jealousy of the discipline.* Yoder shows compellingly how a
certain jealousy might aid resistance to odious forms of power.
What are the possibilities of enduring resistance in absence of
this or a similar jealousy?

4. *The generosity of the jealousy.* Is there not a jealousy infusing
and partly enabling every generosity; certain refusals, certain
relatively rigid limits to any "yes"? Has this been sufficiently
acknowledged by neo-Nietzschean democrats? Sufficiently ac-
knowledged to draw from this condition its highest possibili-
ties and respond to its dangers (as Yoder does in his rendering
of patience)?

5. *The pacifism of the generosity.* In the critique of a certain "per-
petual peace," and in the embrace of a certain agon, have we not
avoided more sustained inquiries into war making as such, even
as genealogists have contributed in important ways to critical
illuminations of numerous specific war making practices? Is
any killing congruent with receptive generosity?

12

Laughing With the World:
Possibilities of Hope in John Howard Yoder and Jeffrey Stout

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Introduction

Near the middle of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic
of Enlightenment,* the authors turn to laughter. This is a rather sur-
prising turn. As anyone familiar with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can attest,
it is not a funny book. While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has its funny
moments (for example, its excoriating comments about Donald Duck),
in speaking of laughter Horkheimer and Adorno mean something
entirely different from laughable things (for example, Donald Duck).
Cover to cover, the authors tear into the most basic presumptions and
habits of Western civilization to reveal a social imaginary rotten to the
core. Horkheimer and Adorno conjure up an incisively vicious alchemy
blending Nietzsche’s pronouncement of nihilism with large onto Marx’s
analysis of systemic brutality. That the authors can utilize the likes of
Nietzsche and Marx to uncover the Holocaust’s internal ratio reminds
us that “depressing” does not have the legs to accurately describe this
book. Nothing remains in its wake. Nothing, that is, but laughter. 1

Horkheimer and Adorno bring up laughter in the context of de-
claring, “The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of
what it endlessly promises,” and the authors show how this parasitic

1. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philo-
osophical Fragments,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
2002).
The New Yoder

John Howard Yoder was once asked, "Are you happy?" To which he responded, "I haven't found that to be a very useful question." Such severity would seem to suggest that Yoder wasn't much for laughing, an impression cemented by his rather dour public persona. And yet apparently, John Howard Yoder loved to laugh, and in such a way that would have shown cynicism to be unfaithful on Christian grounds. For reasons I hope to demonstrate, this odd combination of austerity and laughter witnesses to the doggedly joyful strictures of Yoder's account of hope. His theology after all is one of consummation, of completion and reconciliation, of the type of redemption spoken of by Job (19:24-27) such that the Reverend Sam Wells can preach an Easter sermon entitled, "One Day You Will Laugh." Wells contrasts such laughter to the laughter of the skiing and Adorno reference, laughter as abstraction, laughing at a world bereft of consumption, completion, reconciliation, and redemption. Laughter, then, is hearty stuff; it is, as it were, no laughing matter, for the "rival versions of laughter" differentiate between worlds ruled by either cynics or, as Yoder would say, the worshipped Lamb.

Easter is either everything, or it's nothing. Today is either a doomed attempt to overcome suffering and death with illeis and dreams and cynicism and brass and a descent of the last verse, or it's a peak through the keyhole into a world completely changed by Jesus. If it's a peak through the keyhole, then the way God changes the world isn't the conventional way, through guns and bombs and war and conquest. It's through something more dynamic than coercion, but something even more irresistible.

1966: xxx.


8. I learned about Yoder's laughter from Stanley Hauerwas, who worked with and knew Yoder very well, proving pivotal in bringing him to Notre Dame and his theology to academic prominence. Specifically, Hauerwas says, "In fact, Yoder loved to laugh, and I loved to make him laugh." Whether Hauerwas, who is genuinely hilarious (especially to himself), remembers Yoder's laughter as much as he remembers his own is less important than his excluding memory of Yoder's laughter as indicative of the best of his theology.


- Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 111-12.
- Ibid., 112.
- Ibid.
yet more subversive, and more infectious. Something, I want to suggest this morning, something like...laughter."

As I said, heady stuff. How do we sustain this kind of laughter? In a world so often burdened by unyielding sadness, how might we laugh appropriately? Inevitably, such questions press against hope and the possibilities of forgiveness and what Margaret Urban Walker has aptly called "Moral Repair." As Yoder's theology is a theology of hope, then, his laughter is finally a laughing with the world.

In the following, I bring Yoder into conversation with Jeffrey Stout's account of democracy as a way to illuminate how Yoder laughs with hope. If we agree with Nancey Murphy that Yoder offers a "fairly complete, systematic account of Christian theology," though he refuses to speak in the terms of a systematician, then his hope, like his pacifism, inhabits his understanding of God and God's activities in the world, or what we might call history. Similarly, Stout's democracy is beholden to a larger conception of history, or on pragmatist grounds, democracy is a view of history as nothing other than the engaged participation of citizens. By showing how hope works for Stout, my larger purpose here will be to underscore Yoder's own peculiar brand of hope, showing why both Yoder and Stout have reasons for hope and thus laugh with the world despite its many troubles. I first look at Stout's Hegelian reasons for hope, unpacking through Merold Westphal how such hope and laughter work, and finally turn to Yoder's account of history and hope, borrowing critical insights from Gerald Schlabach.

Hope and Its Reason

The 1970s and 1980s saw several philosophical and theological critiques of contemporary liberal democracy, eventuating in a simmering unease with Christian participation in democratic life. These voices, which

10. Wells, "One Day You Will Laugh."

Laughing With the World

included Stanley Hauerwas and indirectly Alasdair MacIntyre, sought to show that "liberalism" undermined the very moral formations that made common civic life possible; by aligning itself with pernicious forms like market capitalism or rugged individualism, contemporary democracy could not help but sow the seeds of its own destruction. Specifically for Hauerwas, the greater consequence was not for America but rather for the Christian church, to the extent that American Christians continuously conflated their commitments to America and their commitments to Christianity. These discomfits were not helped by the likes of John Rawls and Richard Rorty, who seemed to add fuel to the fire by articulating, rather unapologetically, democratic reasons for the church to stay away. In response, folks like Hauerwas argued that Christian faithfulness did not require a retreat from politics but rather constituted an alternative politics, such that instead of abdicating to demands for conformity, "Let the church be the church."

It is within this rather messy context that Jeffrey Stout seeks to help Christians imagine the church being the church within, rather than over against, the contemporary realities of liberal democracy. Since the early 1980s, among professional religious ethicists, Stout has mounted the most sustained and vigorous defense of Christian participation, specifically by defending it against the likes of MacIntyre and Hauerwas. He does so by attending to their critiques and showing how the respective hopes of democracy and Christianity need not be mutually exclusive, rebuking along the way Christianity's cultural despisers and democracy's religious despisers for their lack of hope, their trigger-happy willingness to contrive a political vacuum that would only result in self-fulfilling prophecies. Rather than surrender to hopelessness, Stout seeks to revitalize hope, or at least name that which enables his own rather amazing hopefulness. Stout questions MacIntyre's now famous indictment of incommensurability by pointing to the possibilities for genuine dialogue despite seemingly competing "collateral commitments." In Democracy and Tradition, Stout utilizes Robert Brandom's Hegelian pragmatism in order to show how recent advances in philosophy of language and
philosophy of religion reveals incommensurability to be greatly exaggerated. Branden writes about Hegel, "The essence of modernity is to see that the norms we are bound by are not just there antecedently to and independently of our doing. The characteristically modern insight is that norms are not, as traditional forms of life implicitly took them to be, independent of the subjective normative attitudes of concept users. They are, rather, products of our recognitive practices." For Stout, democracy as a "recognition practice" is one of the ways we make explicit, at least in a political way, overlapping commitments that remain largely unspoken until dialectical processes of consciousness require articulation in order to, as Branden describes, "make explicit how ordinary empirical concepts work." History, for Stout as it is for Branden's Hegel, is one way we speak of this dawning self-consciousness, a way of keeping record of our ineluctable dependence on subjective normative attitudes. Stout depicts the substance of democracy as being with others, and its procedures as bridge-building piecemeal achievements. What is required are the virtues of charity toward others and humility toward self. Against moral skepticism, Stout holds that moral claims are justifiable; against moral absolutism, he claims that justifications are contextual. The reason charity and humility are required is because of this double claim in favor of justification and context. If moral justifications are context-laden, and the context is conversation, then the practice of conversation requires and inculcates humility and charity in the democratic game of giving and asking for reasons. Democratic discursive practices are designed to hold themselves open this way. Moral justification attempted in abstraction will always fail because asserted a priori, they forget the context of conversation, which makes any moral claim unmeaningful. As Branden states, "Talking at all involves acquiescing in and employing inferentially articulated conceptual contents. It follows that unless one engages in practices of giving and asking for reasons (rationally integrating commitments), one cannot mean anything: one cannot use those meanings to exert power, nor to engage in literary play, without implicitly acknowledging the normative force of reasons, in the form of what is incompatible with what, and what is a consequence of what." Stout's conversational account of legitimation avoids bewitching metaphysical conundrums because it frames the relationship between truth and justification as use, only further elevating the virtues of charity and humility and the requisite practices of "open-ended inquiry." Democracy as dialectic of asking for and giving reasons grounds hope in an enduring possibility. This is how democracy realizes (becomes conscious of) itself. Stout states, "We are fortunate to be able to ask questions" because such discursivity engenders reasons for hope as long as citizens remain in the game. Disengagement kills hope. The promise of democracy gives and hence demands participation, and only as participation remains will history remain open.

Stout chastens the hopelessness of democracy's cultural and religious despisers by retrieving the historical dynamic of hope and critique that fueled the black intellectual tradition, with the obvious implication: African-Americans have reasons for hopelessness and yet remain beholden to democratic possibilities in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, their most cherished and critical moral traditions. Stout makes his case by presenting the black church and its involvement in American democracy in order to exhibit reasons for hope in democracy. If former slaves have flourished, then certainly white liberals like Hauerwas and MacIntyre should be slow to beg out, and should instead pressure their critiques within the larger horizon of the civic nation, which includes many ill-treated but critically engaged


15. Robert B. Branden, "Unintimacy of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit," Unpublished manuscript (http://www.pitt.edu/~brandon/index.html). Part of the implication of Branden's argument, as I take it, is that genealogy speaks to linguistic biography and hence does not undermine but rather affirms truth-claims and their possibilities: "the genealogy of a particular set of inferential-and-incompatibility commitments—the way they have arisen through the rational rectification of actual prior commitments—is essential to understanding their validity, the bindliness of the norms they embody" (884, 11).


17. Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 279, 236.

citizens. In this way, the despisers have gone, as Stout says, "too far" in their critiques and hence not far enough in their hope: "I take for granted that our condition is always bad enough in some respects to disturb anyone with a conscience—bad enough today, surely, to bring a democrat close to despair. . . . I also take for granted, as a postulate of practical faith, that there are grounds for hope and humor if we look hard enough in the right places. This was true for the survivors of the Holocaust and for the victims of chattel slavery, so it must be true for us."19

For Stout, history is not an abstraction, a privileged view from nowhere, rather, just as citizens occupy space as politics, so they occupy time as history. In the dense materiality of democratic participation, history comes to be as citizens birth it into the world. History is made this way. At its best, democracy makes its own history. That is its great promise, the great installment of hope that a demos can be what it wants to be. The continual straining-to-be of democracy also underscores its fragility and evanescence. Democracy is not an institution, though it often follows the course of institutionalization. Nor is democracy a political system, though it can be found in political systems. Rather, democracy comes to be and is always on the cusp of non-being, and only as such on the cusp of becoming. Political liberalism falls short in describing the civic nation when it fails to pay heed to these desires that animate democracy. Hence, Stout's democracy is the political form of hope, a gathered life between potentiality and actuality that always promises more as witness to an abiding and immanent moreness. Perhaps better than any other twentieth-century political theorist Hannah Arendt understood this and so employed the biblical language of "covenant," "promise" and "forgiveness" as discourse necessary to emplot the cascading contingencies that constitute political life.20 Like Arendt, Stout's work wrestles with this fundamental question of hope and offers a way by which hope might be more than wishful thinking amidst dark times, by locating its flowering in a determinative form of life he calls democracy.


Laughter and History

In his essay, "Laughing at Hegel," Merold Westphal writes, "It is eschatology as such and not just the realized eschatology of the Hegelian system that is the object, not of mirth, but an anguish laughter that sounds a lot like 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (Matt. 27:46)."21 This anguished laughter comes close, I think, to the type of laughter John Howard Yoder invokes, and in turn distinguishes him from Stout. Hegelian laughter comes with the hope that transcendence dialectically unfolds amongst beings while always holding to an ontological difference. Jacques Derrida relates Hegel with the later Heidegger in this way, citing the unexpected use of "spirit" in Heidegger's work, and through this correlation, one can trace the dialectical rationale shared by both.22 Hegel found Kant's ontological bifurcation unsatisfying, becoming "suspicious of the suspicion" within Kant's transcendental modesty and thus tried to show how within time, realization of the Idea not only would occur but indeed was the only means by which it could occur. And so when Westphal speaks of a "realized eschatology" in Hegelianism, he means all those ontologies that hasten "the self-mediation of totality" because of an unsustainable temporal lack. In contrast to Kant, Hegel desire must be only temporarily forestalled for its production. Westphal sees in Hegel both this impatience, with Kant specifically and philosophically generally, and its overcoming through the "Aufhebung of the finite in the infinite." Hegel begins exactly where Kant balked, and thus puts to work the polemic between the noumenal and phenomenal toward an energizing polarity that drives history. Hegel needs both, and if he is right so ultimately does Kant: ontological difference produces torsion, while time brings the possibility of realization that produces movement, what Westphal describes as "negativity in the service of positivity." History then can be understood as the material expression of this positive-negative polarity, turning over as the agonistic coming to be of things in the world and indeed the world itself. There is laughter in Hegel but it's always brief and exasperated, more anxiety than joy. Every consummation produces

new tensions, every satiation new dissatisfaction, until laughter speaks less of play than relief, though relief quickly met by more agony to be synthesized. Within the Hegelian system this is the best that can be hoped for. Yet even within this “completion of mediation” Westphal highlights remainders that cannot be sublated; here death and life, as irreducible presence of chance and contingency, endure, and thus one laughs at Hegel’s silly and contrived die Geschichte ist happy geendet which would be sad if not for Hegel’s ambitions. Because Hegel is so drop-dead serious, not knowing to laugh at himself, one can only laugh at him, rather than with him which one might do if Hegel only realized how simultaneously hopeful and hopeless his project is.13

Westphal goes on to press Derrida in the other direction as “Derridean thought remains without hope, anticipating no future time in which we will be simply present to a fully just world...”14 For Westphal, the attempt from Kant to Heidegger to map transcendence within the terms of immanence renders any fabrication of difference reducible to that transcendence, hence to that immanence because within the terms of finitude (immanence without an actual other) necessity reigns. Hegel smuggled in difference only by first foisting a mythic totality, or more precisely by speaking of that difference within the larger terms of pure thought as the realization of freedom. Hegel and Derrida are offshoots of the same metaphysical soil, the Kantian bifurcation of being. Hegel tries to assuage this difference by historical materiality while Derrida tries to sustain it. In both cases, the Kantian problematizing of difference—its modesty rendering it more powerful—sets the terms of the debate.

In differentiating Derrida and Hegel, Westphal states, “Hope. Ay, there’s the rub.”15 The question that pushes Westphal’s readings of Hegel and Derrida is the same one that press me in this current essay: What hope respectively animates Stout and Yoder? No doubt both are clear about the current conditions of the world in which they write. Both are cognizant of the dire straits that any moral community in its delicateness resides. And yet in both, there remains an inexhaustible hope such that laughter is for each more than laughing at, but a laughing with.

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24. Ibid., 218.
25. Ibid., 207.

Still, my contention is that Stout’s hope is more like Hegel’s than Yoder’s; indeed, he employs Hegelian pragmatism in order to describe democracy and it is within the terms of Hegelianism that Stout’s project offers hope. Stout’s hope is animated and sustained by a way of seeing, which I have described as Hegelian in that it stretches forward in time and imagines the arrival of possibilities that perdue even amidst the worst of circumstances; according to Stout, we can retrospectively acknowledge that nothing was ever as bad, or as good, as it seemed, because an imminent newness coheres beyond sublation, an inexhaustible plentitude germane to history’s materialization. Thus Stout’s history is necessarily hopeful; more precisely, his is a way of viewing history as hope, its steadfastness in the past and its possibility in the future. There was always more. This is always more. There always will be more. How else might one live? Of course, like Hegelianism, such animations and endurance are sustained by selective blindness. But then so is all perception and to pin that exclusively on Stout would repeat the same error. Hope always works this way, as it trains a certain kind of seeing, indeed, seeing what others don’t see, what history hasn’t shown. No wonder the writer of Hebrews speaks of faith as hope in things not seen (Heb 11:1), which we might rephrase as seeing things others don’t see. In this way, Stout, like Yoder, is a believer.

Cities of Hope

In “The Spirit of Democracy” where he clarifies some of his arguments from Democracy and Tradition, Stout contends against a pacifism that ostensibly inhibits Christian political participation and though he targets Hauerwas, it is at this point that Stout must come to terms with the politics of Yoder.16 For Yoder, the axiomatic distinction by which Christian ethics is to understand itself is not church and state, a polemic that would certainly warrant accusations of sectarianism. Rather, the primary axiomatic difference lies between church and world: the direction of God’s rule as opposed to the direction of sinful humanity. For Yoder, the distinction between church and world can be most directly understood in terms of the larger narrative by which one understands history and by which a moral community envisions its place

in the world. For Yoder, the givenness of God’s victory in Christ, what he calls “the war of the Lamb,” gives reasons for the church’s hope; and in a sense, the church’s hope is nothing other than this, all material and historical reasons of being simply proleptic of the larger hope of the Lamb’s victory.

Yoder states as much near the beginning of The Christian Witness to the State, where he claims the “ground” for Christian social ethics as the scriptural claim, “Jesus Christ, ascended to the right hand of God, is now exercising dominion over the world.” According to Yoder, this dominion, which overcomes the claims of dominion asserted by the powers, proves the foundation by which Christian claims have relevance for every province, not simply the church.27 Every “advance” can only be designated to the extent that it can be mapped onto this hope, which can at best be done in an ad hoc and retrospective manner.28 In other words, for Yoder, hope resides in Jesus’ already but not yet victory such that patience becomes the church’s most critical virtue, and impatience is the most deadly vice. Jesus is the substance of Christian hope and thus the lens through which it orients itself to time and history. Church is that which places its hope for the world in Christ’s saving the world. Yoder speaks of “ultimate values,” claiming, “What matters most, the real reason that God lets time go on, is his calling together of his own people through the witness of the gospel. Not building and protecting a bigger and better democracy, but building the church is God’s purpose.”29 World, in contrast, is that which places its hope in something other than Christ’s salvation. This does not mean that the church refuses to pay heed to the real material concerns of time and history; indeed it invests itself in these concerns as the historic completion of what Yoder calls “the other half of the reconciling process.” Church/world is Yoder’s way of speaking about this hope, a division between saved/unsaved as a fluid reality. Thus, while building and protecting a bigger and better democracy may not be Yoder’s “ultimate value,” this


Laughing With the World

does not mean that within the reconciling process democracy may not be considered a good; indeed, according to Yoder, the reconciling process will include advances like democracy and other practical goods at God’s material activity. That is why for Yoder, pacifism is internal to God’s already consummating activity, not the cause of it—a critical distinction. While democracy and peace may not be the substance of Yoder’s hope, they constitute what Yoder calls the gospel’s “moreness” as the substance of Christian faith unfolding in the overcoming of tyranny and the articulation and realization of human rights as reasons for hope.30

Concluding The Politics of Jesus, Yoder reminds his readers that pacifism is not his primary concern. More so, he worries about those who refuse pacifism because they remain wedded to the world, that is, a rationale that remains atheistic in its understanding of history. It is precisely because the world believes that there is no God, or God does not care about the world, that it charges itself with, as Yoder characterizes, “making history come out right” and thus will utilize whatever means, beyond good and evil, to effectuate those right outcomes. In other words, the problem with the world is not that it loves evil and utilizes violence in a wanton manner. Rather, it desires good, but its goods and commitments remain disordered; it was incessantly not because it loves destruction but because it longs for peace and goodness but does not believe God will bring peace and goodness, so it anxiously takes matters into its own hands through what Yoder calls a “compulsion of purpose.”31 Yoder’s Politics of Jesus names “world” as that which denies the Lamb’s victory, and consequently subjugates creation (time, space, history) in order to save it. Hence, war is wrong because it places hope in the wrong places, and thus finally is not hope on Christian grounds, which has as its object an eschatological belief that the peaceable God has already won. War is the refusal to worship rightly: “Concern for peace, whether Jewish or Christian, is part of the purpose of God for all eternity. God is by nature a reconciler, a maker of shalom. For us to

30. Ibid., 28.
participate in the peacemaking purpose of that kind of God is not just morality. It is not just politics. It is worship, doxology, praise.33

The distinction between church/world for Yoder is construed in this manner. Stout turns to Yoder’s pacifism but fails to recognize this. Ironically, in this way Yoder can be said to be anticipating Stout: Christians can certainly be involved in democracy as one form of the state but to the exclusion of a state that refuses to order its loves, fears, and hopes to God because in doing so, it will rely on itself to order history and will utilize violence, or peace (or violence in the name of peace), to secure its order. For Yoder, the delineation is not church/state, but church/world, and that distinction is set in prominent relief when it comes to the question of the state’s violence and war. Yoder’s pacifism is not against the state, but against a world that refuses to believe in God. So when Stout turns to Yoder’s pacifism, he gets to the heart of the issue, but perhaps in a way that finally puts his case for Christian participation in democracy on shaky ground. In “The Spirit of Democracy” Stout highlights biblical reasons that justify war in order to demonstrate how any a priori certainty about the church’s non-violence can be held only by ignoring a large amount of scripture, not to mention thousands of years of history. It behooves Stout, in inviting Christian participation in American civic life, to show why pacifism is not necessary to the church. Yet in doing so, he fails to attend to the rationale of Yoder’s christological pacifism: the final victory of the Lamb as the ground of the church’s hope. If they are to believe Stout, Christians ought to place at least part of their hope in democracy and a view of history that charges them with its success. If Stout is right, democracy better than any prior social imaginary avails resources for peace, justice, and order.

Because Christianity’s hope lies elsewhere it attends to those things as expressions for its hope, as reasons for its faith. Yoder writes, “The place of the church in the history of the universe is the place where Christ’s lordship is operative. This is where it is already clear that he rules . . . . The church is moving history by her servanthood. Most of us still think that the way to move history is not by servanthood but by some other kind of rule, but the church is the instrument through which God is moving history by servanthood . . . . the servant church

is the reason for history. This is why time goes on.”34 Again, in turning to pacifism, Yoder turns to that which the church/world divide underscores, but not on which it stands, which is finally the critical role of hope as the practice of faith. So Stout rightly turns to pacifism but fails to contend with its logic. He may be suspicious of the a priori claim that God is non-violent. But that is not the point of Yoder’s pacifism, which is nothing less than the biblical view that God, not we or our bigger and better democracies, is in charge of history. The concerns of Democracy and Tradition, that democracy’s despisers are making things worse, betrays the difference, as subtle as it may be, between Stout’s democracy and Yoder’s church. Even though the welfare of the earthly city gives credence to the church’s hope that God is reconciling all things to himself, the city’s seeming success or failure does not determine that hope. Unlike democracy, the church sees not to make its own history, but attends to a history already but not yet made, a history that evinces the making of one’s own history “a doomed attempt to overcome suffering and death with lilies and drums and cymbals and brass.”35 Hence, Stout’s democracy and Yoder’s church occupy different cities. They imagine time differently. They worship different lords. Their respective hopes have different reasons. Stout’s city, time, worship, and hope tempt another hope, and thus can in this way prove problematic to those communities he imagines himself serving. Yoder’s church hopes a different hope: “a peek through a keyhole into a world completely changed by Jesus.”36

Hope as Promise and Fulfillment

Yoder’s laughter arises from the life-giving energies of promise and fulfillment, between prophecy and gospel, between all the fecund tensions that germinate in and over time when one sees history eschatologically.

33. John Howard Yoder, Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). 34. Yoder continues, “This whole pragmatic management/lesser evil/best results approach to being human is challenged to its core when servanthood is made the key to our ethics” (231). By “pragmatic,” Yoder means something other than Stout’s philosophical pragmatism, but his concerns are apace.
34. Wells, “One Day You Will Laugh.”
35. Ibid.
Gerald Schlabach observes this in Yoder and chides Yoderians to articulate more clearly the heart of what Yoder coined "the Constantinian temptation." Schlabach underscores a problematic internal to the Constantinian temptation, which acts as an unarticulated, and often unnoticed, error on the part of those who would deny Constantinianism only to, as he describes, "overinterpret church history" Schlabach astutely gets to the heart of Yoder's theology, and as I argue here, his peculiar mode of laughter.

According to Schlabach, just as there is a greater danger than Constantinianism so there is a more basic promise than that which should help Christians avoid the problems of Constantinianism. Schlabach refers to an inherent "chronological" and "logical" priority often missed, even by Yoder himself, within the terms of Yoder's Constantinian formulation: "the problem of how to receive and celebrate the blessing, the shalom, the good, or 'the land' that God desires to give, yet to do so without defensively or violently hoarding God's blessings." Schlabach points to the Deuteronomic history as the central scriptural narrative of promise and fulfillment. Accordingly, the Constantinian temptation is a temptation internal to and thus coherent within the scriptures' larger story, a reality often missed by those Yoderians who disparage Constantinianism while succumbing to its core dangers.

The narrative stretched between the Old and New Testaments constitutes an ongoing story of promise and fulfillment. The danger of Constantinianism, again a temptation internal to this larger promise-fulfillment narrative history, is the proclivity to usher in fulfillment and to effectively obviate history's dependence upon God. One way theology attempts to name this is the notion of "realized eschatology" but this description often fails to do justice to all that Yoder meant by Constantinianism. "Constantinianism" highlights the tendency to take the Deuteronomic narrative and effectively end, or at least relieve, the tensions raised by the promise-fulfillment structure of the Jewish-Christian story. Without both promise and fulfillment, the Constantinian temptation entices a view of history that makes no distinction between God and time precisely because it asserts the sure realization of God's promises, which in turn allows for any kind of ethical action and concomitant legitimation. By warning against Constantinianism Schlabach sees Yoder as supremely resisting, perhaps more certainly than any other theologian, this proclivity.

Schlabach's point is to highlight a more basic tension that energizes the life of faith by sustaining, rather than overcoming, a central and critical aspect that subtends the relationship, not between Constantinians and non-Constantinians, but between world and church. For Schlabach, the effect of Yoder's theology is to help Christians embrace the reality that one "cannot negotiate the Deuteronomic juncture without retaining a vital sense of eschatological tension." Those who use Yoder in order to raise suspicions of church-state accommodation have often missed this central issue. Equally, those who try to salvage Christian political participation by reflecting their arguments through this concern (i.e., Stout's Democracy and Tradition), then, miss a looming and unacknowledged but equally pernicious parallel: imagining promise and fulfillment without fulfillment. Schlabach perspicaciously perceives this inclination in many ethicists who follow Yoder (and inversely for our purposes, those who would reject Yoder) but forget the larger coherence of his ethics, and I argue, laughter. It is the irreducible and inexhaustible dynamic of promise and fulfillment that gives life to Israel and, following, the New Testament church, and both as possibility and actuality for fulfillment in the midst of history's rival hopes.

Hence, corresponding to Constantinianism's aspiration to champion Christian hope as prematurely realized, those erring on the other side preclude the possibility of fulfillment altogether, rendering Christianity simply a horizon of promise and incorrectly deploying Yoder's Constantinian caveats in ways that undermine every suggestion of God's historical participation in time. This impossibly long view of history asks Christians to forever defer God's place in time and suffer

39. Schlabach, "Deuteronomic or Constantinian," 461. This observation helps us understand Yoder's suspicions of those who would consider themselves "Yoderians" rather than simply Christians.
such a world without end, as if to read the promises of the Old and New Testaments without the fulfilsment of the Old and New Testaments. Schlabach writes, "This means that although Constantine should represent to us the wrong way to embrace God's promise of liberation, shallow, and blessings in all of life, we must not forget that God does want to free, heal, and bless even if, in blessing, God risks the possibility that God's people will abuse God's gift."  

Devoid of actual peace, justice, and order—returning to Horkheimer and Adorno's premonitions of endless promises and endless cheating—we should worry about "wrong laughter." Yet this does not mean that such goods can be taken for granted as birthrights of any politics. This is what makes stout and Yoder so important to their respective publics, for neither posits what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as reconciliation as more than a possibility, but they also do not underestimate that possibility. They celebrate the critical tensions resplendent in any community that dares to hope. Right laughter in this way is itself fulfillment, the realization of hope. Schlabach writes, "Constantine remains a major temptation and a false answer but is not, finally, our primary problem. Life is our problem."  

As such laughter may be the greatest expression of hope and the tensions at play in the politics of promise and fulfillment.

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Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular

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Yoder's Breaching Strategy

The political character of John Howard Yoder's thought is well appreciated. Less appreciated—or perhaps less explicit—is the secular character of his thought. Yoder made no attempt to provide a concept of the secular, and a survey of his work would show that in nearly every instance in which he uses the word "secular," it functions within accepted semantic bounds. This is to say that the word "secular," within Yoder's work, generally denotes the world, as that which is distinct from the church. But what is interesting about Yoder and the secular is not the definition he gives the word, whereby it is opposed to the church, but rather the moments in which he breaches this initial and commonplace opposition by affirming the secular nature of Christianity.

We can look at two instances that exemplify this "breaching" strategy. In The Original Revolution, Yoder addresses the ambiguity and even misapprehension that revolves around the term "gospel," originally evangelion. His proposal of a way out of this dead end requires the reclamation of the initially "secular" sense of the term. "Originally [gospel] is not a religious or a personal term at all, but a secular one: 'good news.' Yoder continues to expand this secular aspect of gospel by remarking that it is "good news having seriously to do with the people's welfare," and news that tells of an event that "not merely ... makes some