

Renewing Reconciliation: Decolonization and Missional Ecclesiology

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I want to start by noting that I'm going to discuss some aspects of John Howard Yoder's life and thought in this paper. My discussion will be critical and will explore some links between his theology and his perpetuation of sexual violence. But I know that any discussion of Yoder can be painful for some, and I support everyone doing what they need to take care of themselves, including leaving now or at any point during my paper.

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On November 1, 1954, a group proclaiming itself the National Liberation Front (FLN) released a "proclamation to the Algerian people." This proclamation announced an imminent conclusion to Algeria's "national struggle" through a revolution "by all means possible" to "liquidate the colonial system" that had been imposed by France since 1831. The goal: independence, the restoration of "the sovereign, democratic, and social Algerian state, within the framework of Islamic principles." The FLN called upon France to immediate negotiations in order to limit violence, relinquish its colonial claims, and recognize Algeria as an independent nation. From then on France and Algeria would relate "on the basis of equality and mutual respect." The proclamation was accompanied by a series of FLN military actions throughout the country. Instead of negotiations, a protracted war broke out that lasted until the achievement of Algerian independence in 1962.

Almost two months before the start of the war on September 9, 1954, an earthquake caused mass casualties and destruction around Chlef in northern Algeria. John Howard Yoder, then a 27-year-old PhD student at the University of Basel, organized a mostly American Mennonite mission team to build houses for Algerians displaced by the earthquake. Yoder had been inspired by the French

Reformed pastor and peace activist André Trocmé, who proposed a joint Mennonite-Reformed work project in Algeria to address some of the many social problems caused by colonialism—while settler European *pieds noirs* lived in relative prosperity, Arab and Berber Algerians had few economic or educational opportunities. Trocmé thought that a peaceable, service-oriented presence in Algeria could better the conditions of Arab and Berber Algerians and thereby demonstrate the true, non-colonial face of the gospel to an almost entirely Muslim population.

This vision of postcolonial Christian mission resonated with Mennonite Board of Missions general secretary J. D. Graber, who gave Yoder permission to put together and send a team. (MBM was the mission agency of the Mennonite Church, one of the major North American Mennonite denominations in the 20th century.) Graber's experiences as a missionary in China and India in the 1940s had already led him to search for an alternative to the colonial model of mission. After becoming the MBM general secretary, he led the agency to present the gospel as an alternative to the lures of both capitalism and communism and to promote indigenous church leadership. To use terms that would become popular in the 1960s, Graber gestured toward a "non-aligned" mission praxis that positioned the church as the means through which indigenous aspirations to liberation and empowerment would be realized. Only the gospel, not the competing "materialisms" of the dominant political powers, could fulfill the hopes fueling the global movement for decolonization.

Graber approved the use of Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) workers in Algeria, but in the end almost all of the workers came from Mennonite Central Committee's Pax program. Pax was started by MCC staff members Cal Redekop and Paul Peachy in 1951 to provide alternative service options for conscientious objectors. Early Pax workers contributed to reconstruction projects in European Mennonite communities still recovering from the Second World War. Pax thus initially continued MCC's postwar European work, which had been designed and directed by the theologian and chair of MCC's Peace Section, Harold Bender. As Bender's biographer Al Keim put it, "Bender had in mind a kind of Mennonite 'Marshall Plan' with a focused 'hearts and minds component.' American Mennonites would not only give their war-ravaged fellow believers material aid

but would become agents of spiritual renewal as well." The arrival of Pax in Algeria extended this model beyond Europe.

Bender also led the Mennonite Relief Commission, which controlled Pax's budget. He had given Graber his first mission assignment to China and had helped start MVS. He was also the intellectual mentor to Yoder, Redekop, Peachy, and other young American Mennonites serving in Europe. His institutional leadership and thought, even more than Graber's, provide the essential background for understanding Mennonite mission in Algeria.

The historian John Eicher has convincingly argued that Bender conceived of Mennonites as a Germanic people or "nation." His "Mennonite Marshall Plan" was a strategy to renew a flagging part of the Mennonite nation. The confluence of this plan with Graber's postcolonial missiology, and its transposition to a politically revolutionary, religiously Muslim context, was bound to create some dissonances.

Nevertheless, to a large extent Bender's theology structured the mission strategy in Algeria. Yoder famously imbibed and promulgated Bender's "Anabaptist Vision," even if he, Redekop, Peachy, and other young American Mennonites serving in Europe came to see Bender's own institution-focused application of the "Vision" as insufficiently radical. Bender first articulated this vision in his biography of Conrad Grebel, whose "initial and basic breakthrough" he described in terms of a believers' church distinct from the state and existing only by "preaching the word." The ministry of this peaceful community of disciples, he would write in "The Anabaptist Vision," serves as a "judgment on the contemporary social order" that thrives on violence.

Although Bender's 1960 Conrad Grebel lectures would not be published until 1962, at the end of the Algerian war, they summarize his thought as it evolved in dialogue with Yoder and other members of the so-called "Concern Group" during the 1950s. For Bender, God graciously comes to us in Christ with an offer of reconciliation. Yet this invitation is not merely spiritual or invisible, but rather visible in the life and proclamation of the church. The church carries on "Christ's service of love and compassion to all," "identifying itself [as church] in a compassionate ministry with the world's needs, bearing its burdens, suffering with it." In Bender's theology, reconciliation with God in Christ shapes a servant community whose witness calls others into the same reconciliation.

Yoder's letters and reports related to the Algeria mission repeatedly draw on this Benderian missional ecclesiology—in which the church is the primary embodiment and agent of reconciliation in the world—plus a dose of Graber's postcolonial preoccupations. For example, in a May 1955 report on an "investigative trip" in Algeria, he positions the church community as the antidote to the missionary's temptation to impose their culture on their converts. A culturally sensitive, service-based mission among Algerian Muslims would "build a new culture around the new fellowship, the church, to which faith brings them," rather than maintaining the culture of either the missionaries or the Muslim converts. Service was necessary to "establish human conduct" with Muslims beyond the "cultural wall" of Islam. Citing Trocmé, Yoder also suggested that peaceful, servant witness would "deny the accuracy" of the typical Islam view of Christianity, derived as it is from violent Christendom.

Two years later, in a letter to MBM's Elkhart home office, Yoder further elaborated his view that "we Mennonites have special thinking to do about Islam." "Islam," he suggested, "is a state church, a religion which identifies itself with a particular culture." Christian mission among Muslims has failed in part because it has been carried out by Catholic and Protestant state churches with the same, and so clashing, cultural assumptions. An "anabaptist" "analysis of Islam" that insisted against both Islam and Christendom on the disidentification of church and culture could potentially make some evangelistic headway.

Whatever its merits, Yoder's "anabaptist analysis" of Islam introduces ambiguities that undermine its postcolonial intent. The concept of replacing Muslims' own culture with a new ecclesial culture replicates supersessionist logic, even if its purpose is to prohibit Euro-American cultural imperialism. In a political context defined by the FLN's reassertion of Algerian sovereignty and France's rejection of the same, the insistence that Algerian Muslims only reach their full cultural potential by losing their Algerian Muslim culture and creating a new culture with Euro-American Christian missionaries strikes a discordant note. It seems less to continue Graber's view of the church as a context for empowered indigenous leadership and more indebted to Bender's theology of the church as community of reconciliation. Muslim political aspirations would not be fulfilled in the FLN's "national struggle," nor in church leadership, but rather in mutual, reconciled community with Western missionaries.

Given the centrality of the political and military contest over sovereignty in Algeria, Yoder's ongoing emphasis on "culture" also comes across as a sleight-of-hand. In his Algerian letters and reports he does not talk about the church as an alternative politics to French colonialism or the FLN's revolutionary nationalism, even though he was already beginning to develop such a political ecclesiology in his European conference papers on church-state matters in the 1950s. But, as described above, his vision of the supersession of Islamic culture in the church can also be read as a vision for the supersession of Islamic politics.

Yoder typically described the political position of the Mennonite missionaries in Algeria in neutral terms. Unlike "the other [evangelical] missionaries" in Algeria, whose fundamentalist militarism made them natural allies of the French colonial authorities, Mennonites could present themselves as neither pro-French nor pro-FLN. Neutrality would be central to the mission strategy in revolutionary Algeria, again for the Trocmé-inspired reason that it would show a new, non-militaristic face of Christianity to Muslims. As Yoder put it in May 1956, "the whole hope of Christian missions in the Islamic world hangs on our ability to make clear to those peoples that our message is not tied to our cultural and political structure." Yoder even raised the possibility of making contact with the FLN to assure them that "we are not partisan," so that in the event of independence the mission would not be discarded as a relic of the colonial era. "That," Yoder said, "could be the beginning of real mission work in Algeria."

Yet Yoder hedged his bets. As of January 1957 he remained optimistic about the future of the mission, regardless of the political outcome in Algeria: "If peace returns under French administration we have a running start with a handful of very good friends; if there is some kind of Arab government everyone knows that we were civilians helping the Arabs voluntarily and even suspected [wrongly] of procuring medicine for the rebels." This use of the language of "friendship" to characterize the mission reappears a year later in a *Gospel Herald* article in which Yoder described for North American Mennonite audiences how Algerians "have seen a handful of young men come into their midst...considering themselves friends of Arabs and colonists alike, driven by no visible motive other than the one they announce, to serve 'In the Name of Christ.'" Politically neutral friendship will ensure the success of the mission in a context divided by "two irreconcilable camps."

After Yoder returned to the United States later in 1957, his replacement as MBM secretary for the Algerian mission, Miller Stayrook, saw more clearly that maintaining friendships with colonists created a false neutrality. As Stayrook put it in 1959, Mennonites needed "to rethink seriously the whole question of our working in cooperation with the [French] administration." Cooperation between Mennonite missionaries and colonial administrators left a visible impression of support for colonialism. This impression exposed the missionary's "Arab friends" to FLN reprisals and undermined the possibility of continuing mission work under an independent Algerian regime. Of course, Yoder would respond that the impression was misleading. The mission was really making visible the possibility of reconciliation with God-in-Christ, which reconciliation enabled the overcoming of irreconcilable differences in the new culture of the church.

Was the impression misleading? When Yoder started the mission in 1954, he received permission not only from MBM but also from the French colonial government. The Pax boys building houses after the earthquake relied on colonial administrators and church leaders for instructions and building materials. Whatever Yoder's intentions, the arrival of American Mennonites under the auspices of the colonial government was sure to give an appearance of motivations other than politically neutral "service in the name of Christ." It was rather likely to offer the distinct impression of service to the colonial state, perhaps as part of France's occasional efforts to legitimate colonial rule through the provision of humanitarian aid and social services.

An illuminating parallel can be observed with Yoder's justification of his sexual violence. Yoder described his sexual violence as an eschatological-ecclesiological experiment through which women and men, as members of the reconciled community, could relate to one another in new, liberating ways beyond the divisions of marriage and singleness. Through physical touch that ostensibly would refrain from sexual intercourse, church members would relieve their emotional and physical needs, freeing them from the cultural compulsion toward marriage and for dedicated discipleship, and thereby beginning to make visible the eschatological community in which "there is no marriage nor giving in marriage." Although it's true that Yoder did "invite" women into his experiment, these invitations were made without regard to the asymmetrical power relations that structured them. This lack of regard becomes most apparent in his

deployment of coercive violence—stalking, harassment, assault, and rape—to force women into his experiment.

In both the case of Yoder's sexual experiment and in the mission to Algeria, desire for the realization of reconciled community overwhelmed concern for the sovereign integrity of the other. If he acknowledged that his violations of women's consent was problematic, he justified his actions as minor faults in service to a greater good—like falling down a few times when you're learning to ride a bike. His safety and wellbeing, and the success of his mission, took priority. So in Algeria, Yoder could entertain the fantasy of political neutrality to confirm his "anabaptist analysis" of Islam and his associated missional ecclesiology. What would he have said if some the missionaries' Arab "friends" had been killed as collaborators with the colonial regime? Perhaps he would also have justified their deaths as trivial in comparison with progress of the gospel of reconciliation.

Placing Yoder's early thought within the context of his work in Algeria clarifies some of the limitations of the stream of believers' church reconciliation theology that he took over from Bender. I do not have time to detail the many continuities between his Algeria letters and reports, the more famous theological writings he produced during the war years, or the even more famous later writings, which relocated the discourse of revolution firmly within the church's witness—including its "subordination" to given social orders. Nor do I have time to detail continuities between Yoder's thought and the well known work of J. Denny Weaver. In his recent memoir, *New Moves*, Weaver attributes his break from traditional Mennonite theologies of nonresistance to the two years he spent as a Pax worker in Algeria after the war. Hearing ordinary Algerians celebrate the achievement of independence shaped his political and theological consciousness, and on his own telling was an early spark that led to his "activist" nonviolent Christology and ecclesiology. Yet if Weaver celebrates "activism," he never raises questions about the structure of the Bender-Yoder theology of reconciliation, nor does he grapple with its relation to questions of political or personal sovereignty.

In recent years some "activist" Anabaptists have begun speaking up for Indigenous land rights, the rights of Palestinians to freedom from occupation, and similar causes. I welcome these moves, but am not sure that we have adequately rethought the theology of reconciliation or the associated believers' church missional ecclesiology that led us to this point. Rethinking of course is not

discarding. Bender and Yoder did not invent this theology, even if they gave it an influential cast that in some important respects now looks disturbing. If a believers' church theology of reconciliation is to have integrity, it will need to respond to the decolonial challenge and articulate a positive theology of extra-ecclesial sovereignty. This theology would not need to offer unqualified support for decolonial nationalism, violent revolution, or state-building projects. But it would need to go beyond the fantasy of neutrality and expand beyond the justification of the church community as the locus of liberation. It might need to develop a more robust theology of the 'mystery of reconciliation' as something that, while we hope to embody it in the church, is ultimately an eschatological gift that can only be received by grace—not coerced.

Thankfully John Howard Yoder was not the only one with an "anabaptist analysis" of events in Algeria. The Swiss Mennonite nurse Annie Haldemann worked with the mission from an early era, providing medical and educational services. In lengthy letters written to Yoder and other mission administrators in the final months of the war, Haldemann "rejoiced in the independence of the Arabs, even if things will not always be easy for missionaries in an Islamic state." After naming clearly the abuses of colonialism—in a way that Yoder never does in his Algeria writings—she proclaims that "liberty is a precious gift of God, similar to holiness and peace." Although she is realistic about the likely deficiencies of a new Algerian state, her relationships with her Arab neighbors convinces her that they will stay true to their promises and move toward a just, democratic future for all inhabitants of Algeria. The onslaught of right-wing French settler terrorism and divisions within the FLN at the end of the war leads her to "think a lot about the biblical meaning of authorities, about the attitude to adopt towards them, whoever they may be, and submission to them as long as they do not ask for anything that is contrary to the commandments of God, about the kindness and deference to show to those who represent them, and the distance to absolutely maintain towards their politics and any patriotic cult whatsoever."

With these words Haldemann combines a believers church missional ecclesiology with a forthright critique of colonialism and celebration of decolonial sovereignty—even if it imperils the success of the mission. While Yoder, and indeed all other Mennonites, returned to North America and Europe, Haldemann

is the only Mennonite service worker who remained, serving as a nurse until her eventual retirement and death in Algiers. For Haldemann, embodiment of the gospel of reconciliation and supportive and hopeful, albeit critical, acknowledgment of decolonial sovereignty could go hand in hand.