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The royal priesthood: essays ecclesiological and ecumenical

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For Newman then the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism rested in the conflict between objective and subjective. Macquarrie shows that Newman would have rejected Kierkegaard's view that "faith increases in direct ratio to the risk of being mistaken" (84). Being on the side of objective faith does not make him anachronistic. Newman is modern because he contemplated the consequences of liberalism, and because he saw the pitfalls of relegating religion to the subjective and irrational. Bent on preserving religious knowledge gained over the centuries, he considered the present with a perspective taken from the past, not vice versa. This perspective taught him that it was impossible for Christian religion to exist apart from the outward institutional form in which its history was encased and regenerated.

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The Royal Priesthood. Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical

John Howard Yoder

Edited and introduced by Michael G. Cartwright

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994

388 pages, \$23.00 US Paperback

Best known for his small classic, *The Politics of Jesus* (1972; rev. ed., 1994), the recently deceased John Howard Yoder was a Mennonite/Anabaptist historian, ethicist, translator, theologian, ecumenist, and sometime bible scholar. Though prolific, he never published the theological *magnum opus* that these days qualifies a thinker for the status of "great". Yet his thought was rigorous and cohesive enough that peers could speak of his "systematic challenge" to established theology. On the other hand, Yoder undercut old assumptions in so many other areas that it is fitting his work should also force a reconsideration of what a "great" Christian thinker is.

The 17 essays in *The Royal Priesthood* provide partial documentation of Yoder's almost 40 years of writing, thinking and speaking on ecclesiological and ecumenical subjects. A select bibliography of Yoder's other published and unpublished ecclesiological and ecumenical writings is included. While most of the papers were published previously in journals or in other books, three appear here in print for the first time: "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics versus the Wider Wisdom"; "The Imperative of Christian Unity"; and "Catholicity in Search of Location". But all the essays in this volume will force readers (evangelical and mainline alike) to re-

evaluate their conceptions of the church — what it is, how it should relate to the wider society, and the means by which it might realize a unity and catholicity consistent with its true nature.

Yoder's position has rightly been called a "radical communitarianism" by one author, but his own description is a more useful introduction to his view: "It gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individual than humanism, makes moral standards more binding than puritanism, is more open to the given situation than the 'new morality'" (325). Yoder's church is radically local. It consists of people who "live together in the same city, meet together often, and know each other well" (no doubt to the chagrin of "virtual church" proponents). The main concern of this church/community is that its voluntary members live in loving relationships, mutually supporting and fraternally admonishing each other, ministering to each other with those gifts with which the Spirit has endowed them, and inviting others to join them. Through this practical obedience to Christ, the church displays what a reconciled and reconciling humanity would be like. It is a community committed to embodying in its ordinary life the reconciliation effected by Christ.

Implicit in these affirmations are a host of negations: the church is never co-extensive with society; it is not identical with a hierarchy; it is not simply the place where the Word is rightly preached and sacraments rightly administered; and it is not a life raft by which a few are saved from an immoderately warm afterlife. If these denials seem directed against virtually every currently available ecclesiological option, they testify both to Yoder's critical evenhandedness and the radicalness of his restorationism.

Biblically, Yoder's vision of the church is rooted in Paul: the divine purpose from the foundation of the world was to bring all things together so that God would be "all in all". The cross of Christ establishes the condition for this atoning redemption by crucifying the enmity that splinters the human race. The church in turn witnesses to Christ's redemption by displaying to the world a reconciled humanity in which the divisions of Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female are dissolved in love. For this reason, Yoder has little patience with a salvation that would fish "single souls out of the mass for a privileged destiny". "Salvation," he declares, "is loving relationships under God" (351). One might say that for Yoder there is no salvation outside the church since the church consists precisely of those loving relationships that define the word "salvation".

Yoder's ecumenical views merely extend his understanding of the church. If Christians will be known by their love, this means at the very least that they will be committed to fraternal admonition and genuine

conversation, ready to repent of past infidelities when they are recognized. Ecumenical progress thus depends not on church mergers and theological “agreement” but on the readiness of all parties to converse frankly and to repent, especially of the sin of failing to love each other. Unlike some other evangelicals, Yoder demonstrated by his own candid conversations with members of mainline churches that he accepted them as his Christian brothers and sisters. The sectarian tag which he cautiously accepted is “inclusivist” in that it did not preclude speaking freely and directly with all who identified themselves with Christ.

Yoder was appreciated for his penetrating observations, keen sensitivity to unexamined assumptions, and intelligent advocacy for “believers’ church” principles. He would not have cared for a debate about how “great” a theologian he was. Indeed, as often as he was dismissed as merely a “sectarian” thinker, Yoder must have rolled his eyes to find himself more recently elevated to the status of “postmodern”. One suspects he would have been happy just to be recognized as one who fit reasonably well his description of what theologians were supposed to be: “the immune system of the language flow that keeps the body going...the scribes...selecting from a too-full treasury what just happens to fit the next question...the ecumenical runners, carrying from one world to another the word of what has been suffered, learned, celebrated, confessed elsewhere” (139f). This collection of essays will ensure that his unsettling voice will continue to speak and, one may hope, enliven an inter-denominational conversation for which few, unfortunately, continue to have much enthusiasm.

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Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus

John T. Carroll and James R. Carroll
Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996
xiv + 174 pages, \$22.50 Softcover

When selecting a book with a title like this, it is good to know what you are looking for. Are you interested in preaching the “hard sayings” without compromise, hoping for the chance to be as demanding and hard-hitting as Jesus was himself? Or, aware that preachers rarely stray too far from their cultural and theological superstructures, are you looking for new ways to accommodate the sayings to a new listening culture — in other words, to take Jesus “seriously”, but not “literally”? This volume, co-authored by the