

Haunted: Reading with Carolyn and Nellie

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The [New York Times recently published an article](#) about the revived process of accountability in the Mennonite church between our now-deceased, famed theologian John Howard Yoder and the victims of his sexual abuse. I'm not an expert on Yoder, and, like most people, I too am realizing that there is much I didn't know about the extent of Yoder's sexual coercion—both its content and its reach.

But I have been surprised by the number of people who were unaware this was part of Yoder's past. I started reading Yoder in graduate school mere weeks before a lecture in an ethics class required to be taken by all students—in which I was informed of his misdeeds, the four-year accountability process that ensued, and the results of reconciliation just before his death. It has been distressing to know the extent of abuse was greater than previously thought. It is distressing that so many victims have not been able to heal. Our failures as a church, of the process, are distressing and frightening. Yet to call this a “cover up,” or to imply that somehow the church turned a blind eye, is disingenuous. The truth is this: we failed.

The way I experience this failure is not as a victim or an insider to the process but as a reader and learner, someone whose theology and practice have been formed by reading Yoder over the past decade. I have never known what to do with Yoder the abuser and Yoder the theologian. I cannot reconcile the two. And throughout my time reading him I have always been told to section off the man, that we all have shortcomings. I've been told that we would have no theologians left to read if we judged them by the measure of their own theology.

It's true that there is something difficult for me about certain theologians. I don't give much pause for the broken marriages left behind by Cornel West, the multiple affairs of Paul Tillich, or Augustine's common-law wife and son, whom he abandoned at the urging of his mother.

There are other writers, Barth and Yoder in particular, whose relationships with women are haunting. These women are always around the edges, in the margins,

standing in the footnotes.

It is, perhaps, more common knowledge that Barth had a 35-year relationship with a woman named Charlotte von Kirschbaum, a woman who sacrificed her life for Barth. Because of the love she shared with the married Barth she endured social stigma and was ostracized by the church. Often considered the co-writer of *Dogmatics*, she put her own theology under Barth's submission because she believed in his work.

As much as I am pained by von Kirschbaum's story, she is not the one who haunts my reading of Barth. Instead, my ear is tuned to Nelly Barth, the faithful wife, who endured the humiliation of her husband moving his emotional and spiritual mistress into her home. I often think of her, with so little education, arranged in marriage to a man who carried the picture of another woman in his wallet his whole life, 32 and already the mother of five. What choice did she have but to stay, to endure, to make the best of this life she had been dealt with this powerful man whose gifts were so obvious to her? It is in Nelly's voice that I read Barth.

Of course this is a very different situation than the coercive sexual advances of a powerful theologian over his unwilling female victims, victims like Carolyn Heggen. Yet these women share the experience of being shuttled to the background, of being told that we must ignore them in spirit as we soldier on to the real stuff of these men's lives.

I want to believe there is a better way to encounter the writings of these men, encounters that are not dismissive or that simply throw our hands in the air. It may be that allowing these women to rise up on to the pages as we read them is the place we can start. For the Mennonite church this will quite literally mean hearing the voices of women who were abused by Yoder. For Barth all that we may have is Nelly's ghost, reminding us that she is always there.

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