The opportunity Stanley Hauerwas missed

Heirs to John Howard Yoder's legacy have to grapple with his theology in light of his sexual abuse. Hauerwas's recent response isn't enough.

by Janna L. Hunter-Bowman

October 26, 2017

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary's March 2015 service of lament and confession for the institution's failures in response to John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse as a professor. Photo by Rich Preheim.

Stanley Hauerwas's reckoning with the sexual violence of Mennonite peace theologian John Howard Yoder is disappointing. Writing largely as a conversation between himself and his deceased mentor and colleague, Hauerwas fails to consider the needs and concerns of the people Yoder abused.

In a recent article, Hauerwas grapples with Yoder's legacy of sexualized violence and refusal to submit to Mennonite church processes of accountability. Maybe Hauerwas didn't intend this unhappy letter of repentance to be his first major public statement on the subject, but it is what we have.

I understand the shock of discovering the full extent of Yoder's abuse as a sexual predator, which Hauerwas acknowledges having learned about from a report originally published almost three years ago. I also understand the need for time and space to recalibrate, on personal and professional levels. Yoder was an intellectual giant, and he shaped my theopolitical imagination, too. As a peacebuilding practitioner, I deployed some of his key terms and concepts in developing a political violence and peace monitoring project in war-torn Colombia. Now I'm assistant professor of peace studies and Christian social ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary—my role succeeds the one Yoder had at this institution. I understand the need to recalibrate. Recalibration is indeed necessary.

But in this case recalibration requires reorientation. Hauerwas writes, "I owe John Yoder the truth." The line captures his tone: this statement on Yoder's abuse pivots on what is owed to Yoder. The people he abused are peripheral at best. Hauerwas mentions the women whose lives Yoder deeply harmed, and he names Carolyn Holderread Heggen. But he portrays her as an inert victim. He fails to consider the instrumental role she and others played in bringing Yoder's violence and subterfuge to light.

The influence of survivors is detailed in a 2015 report Hauerwas cites [pdf], Rachel Waltner Goossen's "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse." The report itself came out of survivors spurring on a Mennonite Church USA discernment group to initiate a study. Had Hauerwas foregrounded the people abused, he might have noted the survivor-centered services at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary—services of institutional apology, confession, and lament. They were by all accounts profoundly healing and transformative steps. These examples illustrate why restorative justice and survivors' advocates alike teach us that responses to violence need to have survivors at the center.

Moreover, Hauerwas fails to grapple deeply enough with the substantive questions raised. He joins Alex Sider in noting that Yoder turns away from affective and psychological dimensions of formation and relationships, but he does not address the implications of their absence. He highlights the "most challenging question" raised by four scholars: "What do we do with the places where Yoder's actions were *consistent* with his theology?" But he does not provide a straightforward answer to that question, certainly not one commensurate with his intimate knowledge of Yoder's work and theological insight.

I’m not at all happy about this, but it is incumbent upon those of us who have inherited Yoder’s theological legacy (wittingly or otherwise) to grapple with it. Yoder’s theology of peace and nonviolence that makes the confrontation of unjust power a moral duty is complicit with Yoder’s violent actions that abuse asymmetries of power. Theological ideas are not free-floating from the people who articulate them, I have learned. Yoder’s theology is complicit with his abuse.

In my academic study, I work with marginalized communities that are in one-to-one correspondence with the communities that Yoder describes in his ideas for what the church should be. These communities that should vindicate Yoder’s theology—which is also his social theory—shine light on absences and silences that are disturbingly relevant to his treatment of women.

In the triangulated conversation with Yoder, Hauerwas brings up “Yoder's eschatological convictions that the church is the manifestation of the ‘original revolution’ which entailed the ‘creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them.” In the messianic eschatology that Yoder claimed, the last or ultimate things interrupt the present, identified or forecast as God’s activity in history. Part of what this means is that messianic practices, power, and communities do not have a foothold in state power.

Messianic eschatology is also the best theoretical framework to talk about how people become agents of change in situations of open war where the state is absent. As I have accompanied Colombian communities in the last 16 years, it has been clear that they do not live in the staccato of messianic moments. They have needed to engage in give-and-take with others (including the state) as conditions on the ground changed and government became more responsive. Yoder’s messianic theology fails to account for how communities can transform society and provides little guidance to actual peacebuilders.

How is this relevant to Yoder’s abhorrent actions? State involvement in Yoder’s ideal churches is not an option. After all, the idea of government intervention in the messianic community is theologically incoherent. As a result, recourse to the state is not a viable option for members of the messianic community. Gaps in Yoder’s work shroud his abuse of individuals while these categories in his political theology protect him and other abusers from external checks and systems of accountability.

Yoder has had a considerable influence on a generation of scholars. If we shy away from adequately wrestling with what he wrote, we are likely to re-ingrain theological categories that enable and shelter violence. We need a robust rethinking of peace theology in which survivors' perspectives are central. Doesn't Hauerwas owe as much to the people Yoder abused, the academy, and those seeking to be faithful?