

'That Cross's Children, Which Our Crosses Are': *Imitatio Christi, Imitatio Crucis*

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Abstract

How does one rightly name and discern *imitatio Christi*, *imitatio crucis*, and the relation between them? In one provocative attempt to answer this question, John Howard Yoder identifies Christ-imaging in vulnerable enemy love and rejects all other criteria. This essay reads the iconoclasm of Yoder's approach through poetry of the cross by William Mure and John Donne. It then proceeds to repair Yoder's Mure-like posture with Donne, as well as the writings of Margaret Ebner and Margery Kempe. These texts destabilise the dichotomies that sustain Yoder's iconoclasm and illustrate the inadequacy of a single criterion for *imitatio Christi*. Yet Kempe and Ebner's texts are also infected with violence such that they, too, need repair. Vulnerable enemy love thus returns as a negative condition for Christ-imaging, and Yoder's strong iconoclasm is moderated to a weaker iconoclasm that breaks images purporting to be Christ-like but are, in fact, violent.

Keywords: cross, John Donne, Margaret Ebner, iconoclasm, *imitatio Christi*, Margery Kempe, love, William Mure, John Howard Yoder

The story of an iconoclasm that breaks object-images like icons and crucifixes is a familiar strand of Christian history. Yet a related iconoclasm is less overt: attacks on human images of Christ (*imitationes Christi*). Such images are not commonly riven physically – though when they are, the broken one may be called a martyr or confessor and claimed as a still more perfect Christly imitation. More often, the iconoclasm is *rhetorical* – a rhetoric that breaks these imitations by contesting their claims to image Christ.¹ Such iconoclasm can bear structural similarities to object iconoclasm, particularly in how these two forms of iconoclasm deploy their criteria. A strong iconoclasm operates out of a narrow criterion for what constitutes a true image, calling all others

¹ For one example of a scholar tracing the multiple iterations an iconoclastic impulse may take, see James B. Simpson, *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (New York: OUP, 2010).

false (and therefore worthy of being broken).² A weak iconoclasm may have broad positive or narrow negative criteria, in which broad positive criteria may mark many images of Christ as true, while narrow negative criteria may identify only specific features of false images.

As human and object iconoclasm may share similar architecture, human and object images of Christ converge in complex and generative ways, so that taking both kinds of images together helps shed light on the phenomenon of imaging Christ more broadly. I intend to explore the imaging of Christ by considering the moment in which Christ is thought to image most revealingly the invisible God: the cross. Because the cross is central to narrate imitations of Christ, addressing it focuses questions about what kinds of making and breaking of images of Christ are internal to Christianity.

I will begin with the theologian who makes what I take to be the most persuasive and explicit case for strong Christian iconoclasm: John Howard Yoder. Though he does not develop an iconoclastic programme for object images, Yoder forcefully elaborates a strong iconoclasm with respect to imitations of Christ. Underwriting his iconoclasm is a set of contrasts by which he distinguishes false imitations from true. I will read Yoder's strong iconoclasm against human imitations of Christ through the cross-centred poetry of iconoclast William Mure and iconophile John Donne. By adding to these readings the narratives of Margeret Ebner and Margery Kempe, who pursue imitations of Christ that complicate Yoder's distinctions, I attempt to repair Yoder's Mure-like posture with a more Donne-like approach to Christ-imaging. Yet Yoder also speaks back to Ebner and Kempe by helping diagnose problems in their texts. These problems attest to the need for a weak iconoclasm, in which the narrow criterion that Yoder uses to identify true images of Christ (thus rendering all others false) instead becomes a negative criterion, identifying only false images and allowing for a wide array of appropriate images.

Yoder on false and true Christ-imaging

For Yoder, *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio crucis* are not separate endeavours. Drawing on New Testament invocations of imitation and discipleship, Yoder insists that to imitate Christ is to imitate Christ on the cross. To imitate the cross, moreover, is to imitate the 'one point' of vulnerable enemy love,

² For a compelling account of Reformation Protestants defacing images as a way of exposing their falsity, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), especially his fourth chapter, 'Fictions'.

the 'one realm in which the concept of imitation holds'.³ He elaborates this true imitation in contrast to false claims to imitation, which include both involuntary suffering and 'naïve outward (franciscan) [sic]' replication. Yoder discounts the former because the cross 'was not an inexplicable chance event, which happened to strike [Christ], like illness or accident'. For Christ, the cross was chosen, and so for a person to 'accept' the cross is 'to move toward it and even to provoke it'.⁴ For Yoder, free choice is an essential condition of *imitatio Christi*.

Yoder dismisses the latter claim to *imitatio Christi* – that of the Franciscans and their barefoot itinerancy – as 'rigid mimicry' and 'naïve imitation'.⁵ The Franciscans imitate Jesus 'slavishly or externally', 'mimic[king]' Jesus rather than 'liv[ing] from his life'.⁶ For Yoder, such mimicry falls short of *imitatio Christi*, and he criticises Christian writers who fail to mark the distinction between the naïve outward imitation of Franciscans and vulnerable enemy love.⁷ As he rejects both Franciscan and involuntary imitation, Yoder also disavows 'mystical' understandings of *imitatio* – including 'ecstatic experience' like *stigmata* – as insufficiently political.⁸ Jesus must be imitated through concrete social action, not inward experience.

In wielding such distinctions against would-be imitations of Christ, Yoder makes an implicit case for iconoclasm. He rhetorically contests Christ images but does not claim himself as an iconoclast nor describe his actions as image-breaking. Yet he makes his case for iconoclasm explicit in his lecture 'Liberating Images of Christ'. There he attempts to call images of Christ – particularly *imitatio Christi* – to greater theological discipline by subjecting them to what he calls the 'iconoclastic perspective' of scripture. He identifies the only positive New Testament use of *eikon*: the crucified Christ, which is for Yoder vulnerable enemy love.⁹ Attempts to image Christ without imaging vulnerable enemy love must be verbally smashed. Drawing out anti-iconic and iconoclastic themes in scripture, Yoder ends with an injunction

³ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 95, 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 80.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *Revolutionary Christianity: The 1966 South African Lectures*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation, Paul Martens, Myles Werntz and Matthew Porter (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), p. 42.

⁷ Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p. 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128, n. 34; p. 127.

⁹ John Howard Yoder, 'Politics: Liberating Images of Christ', in *War of the Lamb*, p. 172.

to 'renew Mosaic iconoclasm' so that Christians may not assimilate Jesus to the cosmology of the age. Wrongly claimed imitations and false images must be broken.

Authorising Yoder's iconoclasm is a set of contrasts: voluntary against involuntary imitation, vulnerable enemy love against Franciscan outward mimicry and concrete action against inward experience. In what follows, I claim these contrasting pairs are not only more porous to one another than Yoder implies, but also that the terms are in complex, connective relationships with one another from which they cannot easily be extricated. What Yoder sees as false imitations can open up into, prepare for and express vulnerable enemy love, such that his distinction of true and false imaging becomes more obscure. *Imitatio Christi* and *imitatio crucis*, I will argue, might speak to images legitimate in realms beyond the 'one point' of vulnerable enemy love, and I will end with a christological description for why this might be so.

Mure and Donne on false, true and truer cross images

The question of what constitutes a legitimate image of the cross became, quite literally, a material concern in the Reformation, when crosses and crucifixes were destroyed as idols.¹⁰ The cross controversy became particularly heated in Great Britain. There public cross monuments were attacked and churches purged of their crosses.¹¹ Yet the Protestants there were not uniformly iconoclastic, and in persuading others to their view of the cross, two Protestants with diverging commitments penned their views in poetry.

Perhaps the attack on crucifixes that is most committed (in length as well as vitriol) is William Mure's 3,200-line poem 'Trve Crvcifixe for True Catholickes' (1629). Mure was a Scottish Puritan, and he waged verbal battle on crucifixes by acclaiming the one 'true' crucifix of the scriptural Christ hanging on the scriptural cross. It is a crucifix available to the faithful only by their mind's eye. We 'looke' on Christ by 'search[ing] the Scripturs, which of Him record, / And crucified before our eyes afford'.¹² References to eyes,

¹⁰ In this way, Reformation iconoclasm differed interestingly from Byzantine iconoclasm, in which the cross was claimed by iconoclasts as their own symbol that could replace images.

¹¹ For more on the controversies around crosses in Reformation England, see Margaret Aston's article 'Cross and Crucifix in the English Reformation', *Historische Zeitschrift. Beihefte*, NS 33, *Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder. Reformatorischer Bildersturm im Kontext der europäischen Geschichte* (2002), pp. 253–72. She surveys the phenomenon of cross iconoclasm more extensively in her book *England's Iconoclasts* (New York: OUP, 1988).

¹² 'The Trve Crvcifixe for True Catholickes' in *The Works of Sir William Mure of Rowellan*, ed. William Tough, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1898), pp. 197–300, ll. 42, 43–4.

looking and seeing abound in the poem, but it is clear he does not mean physical sight but, as he calls it at one point, 'faith's piercing eye'.¹³ Scripture is the location of the 'true pourtrait' that is 'wonderfully exprest'.¹⁴ Mure himself, in pointing his reader to the scriptural portrait, creates another verbal portrait of Christ, enjoining his reader, 'See, now through tears, how He himselfe presents / Nailling vnto his Crosse Thy oblishments . . .' By such seeing the beholder might, 'Resolving more by sinning, to abstaine'.¹⁵ Contrasting with this sin-diminishing contemplation of the 'trve crvcifixe', all other crosses are 'vaine inventions',¹⁶ 'faind shapes' and 'fancied crosses'¹⁷ produced by a 'frantick freedom'.¹⁸ The crucifix for Mure is a dangerous idol. As he writes in a side note, 'The Popish crucifixe doth but mocke & not expresse the sufferings of Christ'.¹⁹ In Mure's logic, then, to attack the crucifix is to attack the mockery of the cross and thus to reaffirm the 'trve crvcifixe'.

In England another Protestant used poetry to lament iconoclasm. Catholic-turned-Anglican priest John Donne describes in his poem 'The Cross', 'the loss / Of this cross [as] to me another cross'. He continues, 'No cross is so extreme as to have none'.²⁰ Yet Donne spends the next several lines arguing we can never be without crosses. They are embedded in human life and the world more generally: swimming bodies, birds raising their wings, lines of longitude and latitude. These, he concedes, are inferior to 'spiritual' crosses, which include crossing one's eyes, heart and senses, so as to live into humility and virtue. Like a carver revealing an image hidden in stone, these crosses reveal the image of Christ hid in a person. (There is an image-making here that involves stone- and sense-breaking.) Donne joins these spiritual crosses with material crosses and the cross of Christ in the last few lines: 'Cross no man else, but cross thyself in all. / Then doth the cross of Christ work faithfully / Within our hearts, when we love harmlessly / That cross's pictures much, and with more care / That cross's children,

¹³ Ibid., l. 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., ll. 279, 284.

¹⁵ Ibid., ll. 683–4, 687. Mure does see such resolve as enabling us to 'beare' Christ's 'image in our lyfe' (l. 33) and so, while taking a hard line against object crucifixes, Mure does open the door to human imaging of the 'one trve crvcifixe'.

¹⁶ Ibid., l. 68.

¹⁷ Ibid., l. 22.

¹⁸ Ibid., l. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., side note 198.

²⁰ John Donne, 'The Cross', in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. E. K. Chambers (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896; Bartleby.com, 2012); <http://www.bartleby.com/357/107.html> (accessed Apr. 2013), ll. 11–12, 14.

which our crosses are.’²¹ While Mure and Donne would agree, then, that the cross of Christ is superior to material representations of the cross, Mure sees competition and mockery where Donne sees preparation and continuity. For Donne, images of Christ’s cross are that cross’s ‘children’, born from and pointing back to the Christ’s cross. The category of ‘spiritual cross’ helps him to articulate the link between loving the cross’s pictures and orienting oneself more completely to Christ’s cross, which bears the cross progeny found and cultivated throughout our world. In making his argument, Donne traces a cruciform shape to the world that finds its culmination in the cross of Christ.

Mure distinguishes between false and true crosses; Donne between true and truer. In the way Yoder tethers right imitation of Christ to a single criterion (‘one point’), he participates in a Mure-like approach to cross-imaging. There is one true cross – identified by Mure in scripture and by Yoder in his vulnerable enemy love criterion – and therefore all others are false. In Yoder, Mure’s iconoclasm against material images of the cross is transposed to human attempts at *imitatio crucis* and *imitatio Christi*.

Yet what if the ‘one true image’ is not so easily disentangled from the nest of images surrounding it? What if we need other true images to love it? Or if the true image keeps begetting images? And what if material crosses are central to Christly imitation? I want to consider the lives of two medieval women mystics – Margery Kempe of England and Margaret Ebner from Germany – who challenge Yoder’s iconoclasm by testifying to a breadth to the possibilities of Christly imitation displayed in the porousness of Franciscan imitation to vulnerable enemy love (Kempe), involuntary to voluntary suffering (Ebner) and inward experience to concrete action (both). The breadth of their imitations, moreover, link cross images and Christ imitation such that it pressures a reformulation of iconoclastic concerns.

Margery Kempe: mystical imitation and ‘naïve outward (Franciscan)’ imitation

Not quite halfway through her *Book*, Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1440) records her loud cry, ‘The Passion of Christ slays me’.²² She utters the cry as explanation for her uncontrollable sobbing that breaks out at representations – verbal or visual – of Christ’s suffering.²³ Her screams and tears display her

²¹ Donne, ‘The Cross’, ll. 60–64.

²² Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), §41, p. 72.

²³ Margery responds not just to the suffering of Christ but also to Christ’s humanity, Mary’s pity, and Mary’s love for Christ. She seems, however, especially focused on Christ’s suffering.

self as slain, proposing a connection elaborated throughout the *Book* between her and the slain lamb of God.

Kempe's gift of weeping, the suffering and ecstasy it entails, makes up the bulk of what may be the first autobiography written in English. Straddling the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, she lived prior to the polarizing politics of the cross that plague England a century after her death – the very politics that inspire the poetry of Mure and Donne.²⁴ To Kempe, cross and crucifix are self-evidently central to Christian worship. Yet they are not just about worship. What she displays, over and over again in her *Book*, is that to love the crucifix rightly is to become cruciform.

One encounter she describes with an image of Christ takes place on Good Friday – the date itself redolent of cruciformity – and the priests and worshipful are 'devoutly representing the lamentable death and doleful burying of our Lord Jesus Christ'.²⁵ Beholding this representation, Kempe's heart is suddenly 'occupied' by 'the mind of our Lady's sorrows, which she suffered when she beheld his precious body hanging on the Cross and afterward buried before her sight'.²⁶ Kempe is drawn into Mary's sorrows, and her ghostly sight of Christ's Passion 'wound[s] her with pity and compassion' such that she '[spread] her arms abroad, said with a loud voice, "I die, I die . . ."'²⁷ She weeps with Mary and dies with Christ. Kempe's double identification with both Mary and Christ is a theme throughout her *Book*. Seeing a representation of Christ's suffering, she enters through her bodily sight to Mary's bodily sight which becomes her ghostly sight, made manifest in her bodily imitation of a crucifix. Margery enters Mary's sorrows and Christ's suffering. There is none of Mure's competition of bodily and spiritual sight here; the two interpenetrate one another as they effect Kempe's transformation.²⁸

²⁴ Certainly the Wycliffites and the Lollards had their own iconoclasm that sometimes led them to attack crosses, but such cross iconoclasm was not widespread nor the cross so politicised during Margery's life. Aston, 'Cross and Crucifix', p. 253.

²⁵ Kempe, *Book*, §57, p.103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Bernard McGinn explores the extent and nature of the union of outer and inner sensation in five late medieval mystics for his chapter, 'Late Medieval Mystics', in Sarah Coakley and Paul Gavrilyuk (eds), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 190–209. Noting their internal differences, he yet claims, '[T]here was an impetus during these times towards presenting an integrated notion of the mystical self that saw outer and inner aspects of sensation – feeling, desiring, perceiving, and knowing – as part of a continuum of conscious and progressive reception of divine gifts' (p. 209).

The first time bodily sight, ghostly sight and weeping are linked for Kempe is on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It is there that her gift of tears changes, for it is, as Kempe claims (referring as she does to herself in the third person), 'the first cry that ever she cried in any contemplation'.²⁹ She is walking the stations of the cross, and a Franciscan friar – one of those Yoder deems guilty of 'naïve outward' imitation – lifts up a cross and leads the pilgrims through descriptions of Christ's suffering. Kempe's weeping intensifies 'as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eye suffering his Passion', yet it was 'by contemplation' that she saw him. Then at Calvary, she is slain. She describes it dramatically:

And when they came up onto the Mount of Calvary, she fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder, for in the city of her soul she saw verily and freshly how our Lord was crucified. Before her face she heard and saw in her ghostly sight the mourning of our Lady, of Saint John and Mary Magdalene, and of many others who loved our Lord. And she had so great compassion and so great pain to see our Lord's pain that she might not keep herself from crying and roaring though she should have died from it.³⁰

Spreading her arms and twisting her body, she is a mimesis of Christ crucified. Yet, crying, mourning and roaring, she is *not* Christ crucified; she is one who mourns Christ crucified, more akin to Mother Mary, St John, or Mary Magdalene. Broken like Christ but also broken as not Christ, Margery images both the mourned and the mourning, both her likeness and unlikeness to Christ referenced in her image.

It is at this point – during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, while walking the stations of the cross, specifically at Calvary – that Margery describes her weeping as a new and different kind of weeping, one in which '[s]he had such very contemplation in the sight of her soul'.³¹ This weeping comes to

²⁹ Kempe, *Book*, §28, p. 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Within the next couple of pages, Margery describes this event graphically, declaring of herself: 'She had such very contemplation in the sight of her soul, as if Christ had hung before her bodily eye in his manhood. And, when through dispensation of the high mercy of our sovereign savior Christ Jesus, it was granted this creature to behold so verily his precious tender body, completely rent and torn with scourges, more full of wounds then ever was a dove house of holes, hanging upon the cross with the crown of thorns upon his head, his blissful hands, his tender feet nailed to the hard tree, the rivers of blood flowing out plenteously from every member, the grisly and

her as gift that is liturgically, geographically cruciform and in response to a cruciform object that her own body imitates, even as it proclaims itself as not Christ in her mourning. Further, this weeping is not a one-time experience but in fact inaugurates a new era of tears that lasts for many years.³² It is loud, astonishing crying that leaves her weak, and it is newly catalysed by hearing the Lord's Passion, seeing the crucifix or seeing a person or beast beaten. Seeing or hearing such events, Margery claims 'she thought she saw our Lord being beaten or wounded just as she saw in the man or in the beast'.³³ Her love of the cross and her conformity to Christ crucified sensitised her to the suffering of all creatures, and she makes a nuisance of herself as her form of (non-violent) intervention for the suffering victims of violence. Her astonishingly loud weeping during the beating of a beast or human is not unlike the strategies of more modern protesters, forcing attention to injustice by making themselves conspicuous, even irritating.

Sites of human and non-human animal suffering for Kempe image Christ crucified. In them Kempe sees 'our Lord being beaten or wounded'. They do not image Christ crucified, though, apart from Margery herself pointing to Christ crucified. They image Christ crucified to her because she images Christ crucified to others. She becomes such an imitation of Christ crucified that she longs to kiss lepers, to be near them as Christ was near them and love them as Christ did.³⁴ For Margery, vulnerable, non-violent love is an outworking of her love for and identification with Christ on the cross, an identification brought about by her relation to the physical image of the cross and pilgrimage to and through the Franciscan's stations of the cross. As she becomes a sign of Christ crucified, her bodily sight opens up to ghostly sight such that she can discern rightly the signs of Christ crucified in the world around her. The images of the world open to the Image, the signs of the world to the Signified, as her bodily sight opens up to ghostly sight.

In the elevation of 'ghostly eyes' over bodily ones, Kempe's *Book* might connote a Mure-like priority of memorial or mental images over material ones. Yet in her reaction of imitating the cross by stretching out her arms and seeing Christ everywhere, her text insists on a Donne-like ubiquity of

grievous wound in his precious side shedding out blood and water for her love and her salvation, then she fell down and cried with loud voice, wonderfully turning and twisting her body on every side, spreading her arms abroad, as if she should have died, and could not keep herself from crying of from these bodily movings, for the fire of love that burns so fervently in her soul with pure pity and compassion.' *Ibid.*, §28, pp. 51–2.

³² *Ibid.*, §28, p.50.

³³ *Ibid.*, §28, p. 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, §74, p. 129.

the cross.³⁵ The result is a web of crosses related to one another, the material opening onto spiritual, which open onto the one cross of Christ. Instead of Yoder's confident distinction between the naïve, outward Franciscan mimicry and the imitation of Christ's vulnerable enemy love, Kempe presents the reader with a Christ who pervades reality, particularly the reality of suffering, such that *imago Christi* may appear to and as the one who weeps for Christ. Her 'inner experience' of Christ's suffering, moreover, motivates and is recapitulated in her attention to non-human animal suffering and other victims of violence. Yoder may not agree that intervention in the suffering of non-human animals constitutes vulnerable enemy love, but Kempe's narrative at least makes plain the way 'mystical experience' might energise or reconstitute itself as concrete social action, including resistance to violence. Kempe's is a vision of *imitatio Christi* in which vulnerable enemy love is as inextricable from her gift of weeping and walking the cross stations, as ghostly sight is intertwined with bodily sight.

Margaret Ebner: mystical imitation and involuntary suffering

Born in 1251, Ebner spent most of her life in the Dominican monastery of Maria Medingen in southern Germany. Her book *Revelations* is the major source of information about her life, and it focuses primarily on her illness and its transformation. What is interesting about it for this discussion is the way her illness (involuntary suffering) becomes Christ-like as she learns to embrace her suffering as Christ's own. Her narrative, in other words, destabilises the strong opposition between voluntary and involuntary suffering, even as it continues to query the line between inward experience and outward action.

Both Ebner's illness and her understanding of it transform over many years as she devotes herself to Christ's Passion. In the first few paragraphs, Ebner describes herself as longing for health,³⁶ but by the end of her *Revelations*, her longing has been redirected to intimacy with and even assimilation to Christ. Central to such transformations was her veneration of crosses. She describes how she 'kissed ardently and as frequently as possible' 'every cross [she] came upon'.³⁷ She would press each cross against her heart, as she said, 'so that I could not separate myself from it and remain alive'.³⁸ Her cross

³⁵ Donne, in fact, transitions from lamenting attempts to abolish crosses to claiming the impossibility of such a project with the line: 'Who can deny me power, and liberty / To stretch mine arms, and mine own cross to be?', ll. 17–18.

³⁶ Margaret Ebner, 'Revelations', in *Margaret Ebner: Major Works*, ed. and trans. Leonard Patrick Hindsley, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 185.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

rhapsodizing continues as she describes carrying crosses, wearing crosses, pressing them against her, even sleeping with them.³⁹ As she seeks out every cross she can to kiss and to hold it, Ebner finds that there is a large crucifix she cannot take down from her choir without the help of a sister, who, worrying about Ebner's frailty, refuses to assist her. Standing before the cross image in a dream, Ebner sees Jesus bend down from the cross, let her kiss his open heart, and she drinks the blood flowing from it.⁴⁰ In this eucharistic image, Ebner is granted an intimacy greater than what she could manage in all her cross-kissing and embracing. While pressing the cross against her heart granted her nearness to the Passion of Christ, the blood flowing from Christ's heart into her body mingles her body with Christ's body, her passion with Christ's Passion. In drinking Christ's blood, she is open, her body porous to Christ's suffering.⁴¹

Ebner's description of Christ's blood flowing into her body immediately follows a section in which she describes her body conforming to Christ. Her suffering had over the years taken on a liturgical shape, intensifying during Lent and breaking into relief and joy on Easter. But one Lent after the death of a dear sister, she finds herself not simply enduring suffering but desiring suffering. Specifically, she desires, in her own words, 'that my whole body would be full of the signs of love of the holy cross, as many as were possible to be on mine, and that each one would be given to me with all its suffering and pain over my entire body'.⁴² In response to this prayer, she is granted a pain she describes as 'severe and unceasing', and it brings her 'immeasurable sorrow' such that she believes future happiness impossible for her.⁴³ Yet taking the eucharist on Easter, she finds sweetness again, and in this sweetness, she begins one of her trademark activities: the unwilling and constant repetition of *Jesus Christus*. Like Margery's sobbing, Ebner's unwilling outcries and periods of binding silence are sources both of suffering and grace to her. She responds to the sweet grace of her Easter outcrying by kissing crosses and ultimately in her visionary draught of the Crucified's blood. In turn, the adoration of images of the Crucified begins conforming her to the Crucified, turning her into an image herself.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ebner, in fact, also describes perceiving a 'sweetness' in drinking from the chalice. (Ibid., p. 91.)

⁴² Ibid., p. 96.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁴ As Amy Hollywood writes, 'Ebner explicitly articulates the way in which her intense meditation on Christ's Passion leads to her inability not to see, hear, and feel Christ's Passion and ultimately to experience it in and on her own body. The process begins

The pattern of Lenten suffering and Easter lightening continues throughout Ebner's *Revelations*. During one Holy Saturday, she is carried up to her little room, very sick and lying prone. In this tomb-like state she remains until she hears the *Gloria in excelsis* at sunrise Mass on Easter. She is 'flooded with power', and the conformity to Christ is explicit: 'I had suffered with [Christ]; I should also happily rise with him now'.⁴⁵ To the wonderment of her sisters, Ebner arrives in the choir at matins, happy and well, an image of resurrection. Writing on the *Revelations*, Amy Hollywood describes Ebner's transformation from 'a lone, ill woman mourning the loss of her fellow sister and caretaker' to 'a woman thoroughly identified with Christ's salvific suffering'.⁴⁶

Ebner's identification with salvific suffering, perhaps surprisingly, stops short of fetishising suffering. The suffering of others occasions mourning, even angst, whether the suffering is human or non-human animal. Early in the *Revelations*, Ebner describes her 'heartfelt sorrow' at a sister telling a servant she is not worthy to serve her. In the same breath she claims that she 'could not bear the slaughtering of the cattle'. Her response to these painful sights is to weep and then resolve to avoid afflicting such violence or harshness.⁴⁷ She describes such tenderness as cultivated by giving her will over to God, for in understanding she '[can]not direct [herself]', she is 'set at peace with all that God had created'.⁴⁸ Out of that peace flows the compassion Ebner describes for fellow creatures. She communicates this compassion as anguish that a fellow creature would call another unworthy when God never said as much to Ebner, and that a fellow creature would be slaughtered when God never slaughtered Ebner for her misdeeds. Ebner's meditation on the cross conforms her to God's own suffering such that she can draw near and mourn the suffering of others.

As Ebner presses crosses against her heart, her body and life conform to the one broken in mercy that we might cease from breaking others and instead be broken on their behalf. Initially sorrowful about her own sickness, she learns to embrace it as a way to enter into the brokenness of Christ, to display Christ's brokenness for human healing. Putting herself in relation to the crucifix, Ebner, too, opens to the sufferings of others. Uniting to the merciful suffering of Christ, who in mercy wills his own suffering rather than

with a conscious concentration of Ebner's energies on visual representations of Christ's suffering.' Amy Hollywood, 'Practice, Belief, and Feminist Philosophy of Religion', in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 62.

⁴⁵ Ebner, 'Revelations', p. 116.

⁴⁶ Amy Hollywood, 'Acute Melancholia', *Harvard Theological Review* 99/4 (2006), p. 400.

⁴⁷ Ebner, 'Revelations', p. 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

willing the suffering of his enemies, she becomes sensitive to the suffering of others inflicted by the mercilessness of fellow creatures.

Ebner's suffering refuses Yoder's distinction between involuntary illness and willed enemy love. She begins her *Revelations* as a sick woman longing for health, but as her cross-kissing nurtures her love for Christ, Ebner wills the conformity of her own suffering to Christ's. Her suffering becomes cruciform, witnessing to those in her monastery of the suffering of Christ for humanity. What she had not chosen she learns to embrace by saying with Christ, 'Not my will but thine'. Ebner's is a more complicated story about agency than Yoder's – one in which a person might find agency in suffering, even suffering that is unprovoked, such that she may display Christ's freedom within it. (In this way, her suffering is not very different from an initially reluctant martyr.) Though the suffering is not voluntary (since she did not will her illness), it is not by the end of her story involuntary. She has learned to will the identification of her suffering with Christ, and her illness takes on a liturgical shape and bears Christic fruit. We might read Yoder's attempt to discount involuntary suffering as a failure to take seriously the nature of imaging as both like and unlike the imaged, and of us creatures as both like and unlike Christ. For given our status as (only) creaturely, finite and power-limited, how like can we be to the one who is both creaturely and Creator, such that we could imitate the Son's perfect freedom in choosing obedience unto death? Unlike Christ, we, after all, are subject to the winds and the waves; not they to us. Our freedom is attenuated by our creatureliness, but such unlikeness is precisely what 'image' denotes: our likeness to Christ will always emerge in the substratum of our unlikeness.

Vulnerable enemy love as negative condition

To reflect on the way Ebner and Kempe image Christ is not to insist that they were perfect imitations of Christ. There are moments in both of their stories where their zeal for piety manifests itself in violence. For Kempe, that violence is the wish that her husband be slain so that she may commit herself to holy celibacy. Though she had once enjoyed intercourse, Margery, after fifteen children, desired to live chastely in greater intimacy with Christ. Her husband time after time denies her that desire, but on a walk home one summer evening, as she is carrying some beer and he some bread, he asks her, 'Margery, if there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless I should common naturally with you as I have done before, tell me the truth from your conscience – for you say you will not lie – whether you would suffer my head to be smote off or else suffer me to meddle with you again, as I did at one time?' Margery confesses that she would indeed

rather seen him slain than have him 'meddle' with her again, to which he mournfully replies, 'You are no good wife'. Eventually they broker a deal in which she negotiates her chastity without taking her husband's life.⁴⁹

More troubling than Margery's fantasy of violence is an episode recorded in Ebner, one she describes as 'lamentable'. Ebner tells of a woman who takes two unconsecrated hosts from a church where the Virgin Mary was known to be gracious.⁵⁰ She attempts to sell the hosts but is caught. Ebner describes what happens next matter-of-factly. 'When she was sentenced to death, a child was cut away from her. It was baptised and then they were burned.' The modern reader may look for her horror to be mirrored in Ebner, who does indeed describe herself as 'filled with sadness' such that she is 'unable to look from [her] window toward the place where it had happened'. She cannot listen or speak about it. So much we might expect from a woman so sensitive to suffering. But what she laments is not the execution of the woman nor even the death of her child. Her horror is directed wholly at the pregnant woman's dishonour of God. In fact, Ebner claims she 'could not endure it if anyone felt sorry for her' because 'anyone who had dishonored a dear friend could not expect mercy from the one who had been dishonored'. She tries to pray for the woman but cannot even desire to pray for her.⁵¹

The questions about why a pregnant woman would venture so risky and desperate an act as stealing a host in a devout land are effaced in Ebner's narrative, which describes the violation of God's honour and the violence its restoration must entail. The pregnant woman corrupts the sacrament of the eucharist, and such dishonouring is rectified (for Ebner, incompletely) when her baby is cut away from her that it may be baptised before it and she are burned. The brief narrative of violence turns on these sacraments. The rites of baptism and eucharist are preserved as the woman and her baby are sacrificed.

It is in moments like these that the importance of Yoder's elevation of 'vulnerable enemy love' is evident. While Kempe and Ebner have helped me offer a repair to Yoder's indexing of Christ-imagining exclusively to vulnerable enemy love by showing its unsustainability as a singular criterion, Yoder now offers his own repair: Kempe and Ebner do not image Christ in these moments of violence in which they reject vulnerable enemy love. In a way, then, Yoder is right. He overstates his case when he claims that *only* vulnerable enemy love imitates Christ, but we can reformulate his insight into the importance of vulnerable enemy love as a negative criterion: no act that

⁴⁹ Kempe, *Book*, §11, p. 18

⁵⁰ Ebner, 'Revelations', p. 148.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

rejects vulnerable enemy love imitates Christ. In other words, although there is not a single condition, not one criterion that can name how Christ-imagining may appear, we do need to be vigilant for anti-Christ-imagining. There are forms of imagining that point not to Christ but to worldly power. For here is where image becomes idol. Even crosses are not invulnerable to the temptation to idolatry. When they are identified with wealth, power and war, they cease to point beyond themselves to Christ, and at that point even crosses become idols. While Kempe and Ebner's use of crosses to draw near and become like the Crucified insinuates that Mure was wrong that crosses and crucifixes are necessarily idols, he must be right that it is possible for them to be idols. 'Idolatry' might help us diagnose what has gone wrong in Ebner's relationship to the eucharist. Yoder's insight into the importance of vulnerable enemy love is helpful because it helps us discern when images become idols; when they draw attention to themselves rather than Christ; when they augment their power by worldly violence rather than pointing to Christ's divestment of the same; when they insist on clanging speech rather than the 'worldly silence' of Christ's cross.⁵² These are images that attempt to resist their dependence upon Christ, that attempt to displace Christ by refusing to wait for Christ's eschatological consummation of all things. Smashing Christ images assimilated to worldly power is the weak iconoclasm that keeps images from the brink of idolatry.

While resisting a strong Yoderian iconoclasm, in which all images of Christ that are not based on vulnerable enemy love must be smashed in their claim to Christ-imagining, I want to preserve a weaker iconoclasm: all images of Christ in which vulnerable enemy love is rejected must be rejected in their claims to Christ-imagining to the extent vulnerable enemy love is rejected. Vulnerable enemy love is still a way of disciplining *imitatio Christi*, but by excluding cases like violent restoration of honour, not by excluding poverty, holy woundedness, itinerancy, etc.⁵³

⁵² Rowan Williams uses this phrase as he explores the world as cross-saturated, as *signa* of the *res* of God, in a classical and brilliant reading of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. 'Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3/2 (July 1989), pp. 138–50.

⁵³ Saint stories that turn on the violent restoration of order are unfortunately common in the corpus of female hagiographies. These stories often tell of a vulnerable, beautiful and frequently intelligent or gifted woman (who is usually also socially privileged) who desires to commit to a life of holy virginity. A lascivious man attempts to wrest her from that vocation, is thwarted, kills her, and meets a violent fate himself in the killing. See e.g. the story of St Katherine and her wheel, intended to torture her, but exploding to kill a thousand heathen. There is also the story of St Agnes, a story in which men who tried to touch her were blinded or killed. These and other stories

The weak iconoclasm presumes a vision of sainthood in which Christ can be imaged through an inexhaustible range of images that refract different aspects of the God-human. This seemingly slight correction yields an entirely different world. The weak iconoclasm is a vision of sainthood that is Donne-like rather than Mure-like. There are endless possible imitations of Christ, including poverty and itinerancy, just as there are unending numbers of crosses, including both humility and flying birds. Adopting the language of Donne, we might say that for Kempe and Ebner, vulnerable enemy love is the 'child' of their love for the cross of Christ, born with the crosses of Christ. The texts of Kempe and Ebner display the way vulnerable enemy love, even when it is incomplete, can come to us entwined with other forms of Christly imitation.

Christological conclusions: imaging the image

I hoped to have shown something of the importance of an expansive approach to imaging Christ, one that allows for many true and truer images and imitations, perhaps webbed together in a family tree of crosses.⁵⁴ Yet at the same time I have wanted to preserve the category of false images and defend the iconoclastic urge to attack those images that would be idols. This approach of expansiveness with vigilance results from a sense of the abundance of Christ-imaging. Such abundance not only seems to make better sense of the way inwardness appears with concrete social action, Franciscan imitation with vulnerable enemy love and involuntary with voluntary suffering, it also

are featured in Osborn Bokenham's 15th-century *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* and Jacobus Voragine's 13th-century *Legenda Aurea*.

⁵⁴ The theological commitments about images expressed by Yoder, Mure, Donne, Ebner and Kempe are webbed together with other (I hesitate to say deeper) theological commitments. Yoder's criterion of vulnerable enemy love is itself the product of criteria about what constitutes a source of authority. The negative valence he attaches to *eikon* results from surveying scriptural passages; finding all but those referring to the crucified Christ or the whole of humanity use *eikon* negatively; and deciding that these uses constitute a pattern. For him, the Seventh Ecumenical Council on iconoclasm is not authoritative, nor must he wrestle with beatification of Margaret Ebner, nor understand a church magisterium as a site of God's ongoing revelation. There are different visions of church among Yoder and company as well: a church as imaging Christ by standing over and against the violence of the world or a church as imaging Christ, however imperfectly, despite being caught up in the violence of the world – a church of sheep and goats, wheat and tares. Discussing these larger differences is important, but images of Christ may be discussed by their more proximate criteria as well. It is my hope that such a discussion might move past the familiar impasses and perhaps provide new ways of reapproaching such important topics as church, scripture, tradition and saints.

makes christological sense – for there are christological reasons to support an expansive approach to Christ-imagining.

The cross, after all, is not aberrant in the life of God. The cross is God's clearest revelation of who God is – but Christ's whole life also reveals who God is, for Christ's life is and reveals the self-giving love of the Trinity. The cross, as one theologian put it, is the trinitarian life of 'donation and re-donation' refracted through human sinfulness, and all of Christ's life discloses that love because Christ is Love itself.⁵⁵ All aspects of Christ's life, including his itinerancy and poverty, his birth and temptation, echo the cross. Christ's first miracle of water-into-wine at the wedding feast of Cana images the gift of blood on the cross regiven in every feast celebrated by his bride the church. The many healing miracles image the healing of all humanity on the cross. The renunciations of worldly power in the wilderness and afterwards image the renunciations of the same on the cross. The scandalous conception and birth amidst inhospitality images the scandal and rejection of the cross. And if these aspects of Christ might image Christ crucified, if the newborn babe images the suffering Lord, might Christians offer a variety of images as *imitatio Christi*? Might Christ appear in the mystic adoring and bearing his wounds? Or the barefoot itinerant imitating him? If, as Yoder famously claimed, the cruciform life goes 'with the grain of the universe', might we, like Donne, learn to discern the universe's grain as imaging the cross?⁵⁶

There is at least one moment in Yoder's corpus in which he seems to yield to a Donne-like vision of imitation. It is a lecture in which Yoder is describing what nourished late medieval pacifism. He said:

One medieval form of imitation of Jesus was the discipline of renouncing property. . . . This kind of imitation was naïve and symbolic, though not in a pejorative sense. . . . When I say this rejection is symbolic, I mean that it was not thought through in terms of social science or institutional theory. It fixed on outward expressions that represent the heart of what had happened. . . . These elements of Franciscan asceticism and imitation led to the rejection of violence.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ David Bentley Hart, 'A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox's Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*', *Pro Ecclesia* 7/3 (Fall 1998), p. 343.

⁵⁶ One of the places that phrase shows up in Yoder's corpus is, ironically, just before his call to renew Mosaic iconoclasm, *War of the Lamb*, p. 179. There is an ancient Christian tradition beautifully summarised by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI of seeing with Irenaeus that 'in the form of the Cross, [Christ] is imprinted upon all things'. Quoted in Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 182.

⁵⁷ John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 134.

Franciscan imitation, still described as 'naïve' and 'outward', receives here more generous treatment from Yoder. The two forms of *imitatio Christi* described – Franciscan and vulnerable enemy love – could be deeply connected in an almost Donne-like vision of crosses birthing crosses, images of Christ birthing images of Christ. Franciscan poverty not only 'led to the rejection of violence' but was itself a symbol (are we close to 'image'?) of that rejection. This rejection of violence is not exactly the same as vulnerable enemy love, but it is not entirely separate from it, either. So we might say that Franciscan asceticism, like non-voluntary suffering, is related to the rejection of violence and to vulnerable enemy love. All these strands of *imitatio Christi* can be present to one another, perhaps because they are children of 'that Cross', whose fecundity will not be limited to a single criterion.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ I am much indebted to Paul Martens, David Cramer and Matthew Whelan for feedback both critical and constructive.