

An undefensive presence: the mission and identity of the church in Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder

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Abstract

This article proposes looking to Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder as resources for moving beyond a stalemate in recent ecclesiology which locates competing centres of gravity in *either church or world*. By contrast, Tanner and Yoder locate that centre outside of both church and world: in God, who ‘was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5:19). Accordingly, they articulate a vision of the church in the world whose posture is wholly, and constitutively, undefensive: a community free of the violence – actual, rhetorical or otherwise – produced by anxiety about securing its place vis-à-vis the wider society. Tanner envisages the church as a graced community of argument founded and sustained by God’s cosmos-wide generosity in Christ, unconcerned with itself as such and instead intent on the world’s good. In Yoder’s case, his christological pacifism undergirds a church whose politics are Jesus’ own, and which therefore seeks, forsaking all coercion, to embody God’s eschatological peace in and for the world. These accounts share three theological moves in common. First is a Barthian priority of divine transcendence, whereby neither God, nor the gospel, nor the world is put in jeopardy by the church’s fallibility (human or sinful). Second is a non-foundationalist commitment to social-historical process, to the particularities of context which constantly form (and reform) the church as a creature in time and space. Third is the generative root of all: the incarnation of God the Word. Insofar as the church is christocentric, it is by grace turned out to the world in commissioned blessing. The result is an account of the church as at once eccentric (its life hid with Christ in God) and firmly rooted in the messy realities of the here and now – realities just as present within the church as outside of it. To be sure, Tanner and Yoder are different theologians with different methods and ends; where Tanner perhaps lacks a sufficient theology of peoplehood, Yoder’s ecclesiology verges at times on the heroic or ideal. Nevertheless, brought together in this way they make for productive partners in non-alarmist ecclesiology, freeing the church to fulfil its calling to serve and bless the world, even as it leaves its borders unsecured, because its faith abides not in itself but in God.

Keywords: Christology, ecclesiology, missiology, non-violence, Kathryn Tanner, John Howard Yoder.

Introduction

Contemporary ecclesiologies are typically dogged by two sets of balancing acts. The first is that between an overdetermined and an underdetermined identity – or more sharply, between ‘the sectarian temptation’ and absorption into the world. The second is that between spiritual triumphalism and humble realism, that is, between ‘radical discipleship’ and being a ‘hospital for sinners’. Points on these continua are combined variously, with extreme polarities resulting in something like ‘holiness’ versus ‘kenosis’: either a virtuous church apart from the world in a fantastically visible alternative culture, or a sin-sick yet religionless haven for (because in the midst of) the marginalised and dispossessed. Thus the present impasse.

In this article I propose looking to the work of Kathryn Tanner and that of John Howard Yoder for help in addressing this ecclesiological stalemate. Though at first glance they may seem unlikely dialogue partners, I believe not only that they have more in common than might be assumed, but that together they offer constructive resources for a way forward. Both Tanner and Yoder articulate substantive visions of a church in the world whose posture is utterly, and constitutively, *undefensive*. This refusal of a defensive stance is constitutive of the church’s identity on theological grounds, rooted as it is in the church’s calling by the triune God. It thus indicates an entire field of issues, dogmatic and otherwise, such as culture and mission, ethics and identity, Christology and politics. The ways in which these issues come to fruition in their projects are obviously quite different; nevertheless, the overlap between them is substantial, even as each fills in, rounds out, gaps and undeveloped areas in the other.

In the following I will proceed in three steps. The first two will consist of exploring the mission and identity of the church as respectively portrayed by Tanner and Yoder. I will then go on to argue for certain emphases shared between them, common theological moves whose upshot is a paradigmatic posture for constructive ecclesiology going forward. In the process I will seek to show how the important differences between the two thinkers can function productively in ways both relevant to the ecclesiological task and conducive to this particular vision of an undefensive church in and for the world.

Kathryn Tanner: a graced community of argument

Relative to the enormous output of ecclesiological reflection in recent decades, Kathryn Tanner has not written explicitly about the church in as

sustained or concentrated a manner. That is not to say that her work ignores the church or does not have implications for it, however. In various occasional essays she has addressed concrete questions of sacramental practice facing the Episcopal Church, and in her systematic theological work she has drawn implications from God's gracious acts towards humankind for the sake of envisioning faithful communal life. Most of all, in her book *Theories of Culture* she argues the case for a relational understanding of Christian identity¹ with immediate and significant consequences for ecclesial identity and mission.

To begin, then, Tanner derives the character of the church and its mission from the character of God and God's mission for the world. 'The central theological vision' driving her work is that 'God wants to give us the fullness of God's own life through the closest possible relationship with us as that comes to completion in Christ.'² Tanner fills out this vision through narration of the twofold movement of Son and Spirit in execution of the Father's mission:³ the One in whose fullness of life humanity is given and called to share is thus the triune God – the radical, originary, unstinting giver of gifts upon gifts, grace upon grace.⁴ Nor is God's gift-giving to be construed as a loss in God or by contrast with the world; God gives ever more abundantly out of God's inexhaustible plenitude, and precisely as the transcendent source of all, God is the vibrant power at the heart of our own freedom as agents,⁵ whose gifts to us are not competitive or privately owned but common, mutually beneficial, universally efficacious and inclusive.⁶

This vision of God deeply informs Tanner's vision of the church. Thus, in her work her 'primary concern is with action in the world, with cosmos-wide transformation of the broadest possible socio-economic and political sort. That kind of transformation is what the church is for'.⁷ To be sure, the church's life as a community ought to be constituted in such a way that it reflects God's radical gift-giving for the sake of the world, 'but this is of no independent interest; the church is to have such an organization only because

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 107–19.

² Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: CUP, 2010), p. vii.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–72.

⁴ See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 67–95. See also Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005 [1988]), pp. 81–119.

⁶ See Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 47–85.

⁷ Kathryn Tanner, 'The Church and Action for the World: A Response to Amy Pauw', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57/2 (2004), pp. 228–232 (228).

the whole of creation is to have it too'.⁸ Put succinctly in terms of mission, 'we are to become as Christ is: for others – and that means ultimately not for the church but for the world'.⁹ In short, for Tanner both God and church are pointed in a single direction with a single purpose: towards the world in fulsome graced blessing.

This account accords well with the picture found in *Theories of Culture*. There Tanner is concerned to counter certain deleterious ecclesiologies which trade on unhelpful or simplistic conceptions of culture.¹⁰ Rather than envision the church as hermetically sealed off from the wider culture through the drawing of sharp boundaries or the reifying of doctrinal rules, Tanner proposes, as both more accurate historically and more attractive theologically, 'that Christian identity . . . is essentially relational'.¹¹ The church is a people identified not by its boundaries but at them, in ongoing engagement with the various communities and cultures surrounding and interpenetrating it. There is no transcultural essence to the church; rather, the church is 'a hybrid formation',¹² constantly constructing and reconstructing its concrete identity across time through its own odd way of putting to use the very same cultural materials available to everyone else.¹³ Consequently the church is best understood as 'a genuine community of argument',¹⁴ united not by agreement or specificity of beliefs but by a common task, that of discerning together the content of true discipleship, what obedience to the Word means here and now.¹⁵

This is 'the often messy, ambiguous, and porous character of the effort to live Christianly'¹⁶ – that is, the obverse of the church's theocentric

⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

⁹ Kathryn Tanner, 'Towards a New Theology of Confirmation', *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2006), pp. 85–94 (93).

¹⁰ Representatives include George Lindbeck and John Milbank (see Tanner, *Theories*, pp. 97–102, 141–2, 157–9). Left oddly unmentioned, but surely in mind as well, is Stanley Hauerwas; Tanner even calls Christians 'resident aliens' (p. 103) without referencing Hauerwas' book of the same name!

¹¹ Ibid., p. 108.

¹² Ibid., p. 114.

¹³ See the similar formulation by Nicholas M. Healy, a former student of Tanner's, in his *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York: CUP, 2000), p. 5: 'The identity of the concrete church is not simply given; it is constructed and ever reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church's practices, beliefs and valuations.'

¹⁴ Tanner, *Theories*, p. 123 (de-italicised).

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 124–8, 151–5.

¹⁶ Kathryn Tanner, 'Shifts in Theology over the Last Quarter Century', *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 39–44 (44).

rooting. Ecclesial identity is humanly relational precisely because it is divinely eccentric,¹⁷ grounded in and orientated towards that which is external, beyond itself. There is a difference between those within and without the church, according to Tanner, 'but what makes the difference is a new relationship with what lies beyond the Christian community itself, a new orientation of standards and values around, not the Christian community itself, but that to which the community witnesses – the free grace of God in Christ'.¹⁸ It is on 'remaining open to direction from' this free grace that the church's identity hinges; such openness is itself 'the organizing principle for [the church's] use of borrowed materials and what centers the arrangement of . . . theological claims'.¹⁹ Respect for God's sovereign freedom is at once imperative and liberating; in all things, the church must remain 'the disciple of God, and not the disciple of God's witnesses'.²⁰

The object of Tanner's critique here is a kind of navel-gazing insularity which fosters at once a narrow inward focus, a defensiveness towards and lack of care for the world, and a restriction of God's freedom through substituting human consensus for divine grace. The concrete (and, for Tanner, most worrisome) danger, attested historically, is the abuse of power. She launches a pointed rhetorical attack on ecclesiologies which seek to 'maintain the upper hand', to 'sustain' and 'ensure the dominance of Christianity in its interactions', with the aim of 'subordinat[ing] borrowed materials to the needs of Christianity', 'assimilat[ing them] completely' through 'absorb[ing them] into a Christian world' – all the while 'nullifying theological claims that might put these others on a more equal footing with Christianity'.²¹ Tanner calls this project 'a misplaced effort to defend the Word from distortion', which invariably 'requires proof . . . of the superior intrinsic qualities of a particular theological position and of the Christian identified

¹⁷ See Tanner, 'Response', p. 230: 'I . . . very deliberately blur the difference between worship and service; unity with Christ is primarily indicated by the eccentric, Godward character of one's acts, and this can and should hold for action in service of others as much as it holds, say, for one's prayer life.'

¹⁸ Tanner, *Theories*, pp. 101–2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138. Tanner makes a similar distinction elsewhere, concerning the truth over against one's own or one's community's *understanding* of the truth: 'Christians, as believers in God, and therefore believers in a truth about proper behavior and belief beyond the relativities and contingencies of human life, are zealous for the truth. A prohibition on dogmatism based on God's transcendence simply prevents them from being zealous for their own understanding of that truth.' See Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 201.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

with it'.²² Such 'defense of the Word gradually degenerates into intransigent Christian self-defense', at times even 'becom[ing] the excuse for a power play' which foolishly believes 'mere witnesses to [the] Word can force its triumph in the world by their own exertions'.²³ The result, says Tanner, is an excessive 'Christian self-concern, alternating as it does between pride and defensiveness, [that] is . . . nothing short of idolatrous'.²⁴

In conclusion, Kathryn Tanner's ecclesiology is marked by a theocentric universalism of radical gift-giving, epitomised in the free grace of the Word incarnate and manifested in a human community as messy as any other, but which for just that reason remains resistant to all attempts to arrest or subdue God's freedom. Turned towards the world in unanxious mission, the church becomes 'a community of mutual fulfillment';²⁵ in the gracious cycle of baptism, eucharist, commission and return, human persons are caught up into the life of the triune God,²⁶ blessing as they have been blessed, performing (out of) the indiscriminate economy of grace.

John Howard Yoder: the pulpit and paradigm of God's peace

By reputation and influence, John Howard Yoder no doubt seems an odd partner to pair with Tanner, given the apparently ecclesiocentric character of his theology. Moreover, since Yoder wrote so much, so expansively, and yet so occasionally²⁷ on ecclesiological matters, his vision of the church can hardly be summarised in such a limited space.²⁸ Conscious of these challenges, in what follows I will seek to pare down his considerable reflection on the church to those aspects most relevant to the present discussion and most apt for noting points of contact with Tanner. I will do so by using Yoder's pacifism as the governing concept for exploring his ecclesiology – not because his pacifism rules his theology, but because, as a theological datum itself, pacifism is both a consequence of his theological commitments and a kind of concentrated nexus thereof: the centre of the hourglass, to

²² Ibid., p. 151.

²³ Ibid., pp. 151, 150, 151.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁵ Tanner, *Jesus*, pp. 90–5.

²⁶ See Tanner, *Christ*, pp. 198–206; *Jesus*, pp. 78–95.

²⁷ That is, non-systematically, rather than rarely.

²⁸ Let me note at the outset, though, that I do not see Yoder's ecclesiology as synonymous with or contained within the ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas. With due deference to Hauerwas' work, which has an integrity of its own, the reflex of judging Yoder through the prism of Hauerwas is an unfortunate accident of academic reception history. As a consequence, there are two chief rules to follow when interpreting Yoder – rules with which, I think, Hauerwas would agree. The first is to note where and how one is reading Yoder through a Hauerwasian filter. The second is to stop it.

which the sand comes to a point and through which it funnels into a new space and shape. Through this lens we will thus better be able to perceive Yoder's unique ecclesial vision.

First of all, the church is non-violent for Yoder because Christ was non-violent: the politics of the church must be one and the same as the politics of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. Whatever other pacifisms there may be, and there are many, Yoder's is christological.²⁹ The incarnation is therefore absolutely central to Yoder's theology in general, and to his ecclesiology in particular. Using terms he avoided, the two natures of Christ contain a double normativity: in this person and his work, in their entirety but most of all in the manner of his death, both the character of the one true God and the proper shape of human life are definitively revealed. God is defined by and as this one; human life in the world is ordered to and normed by his way.

Notably, the normativity of Jesus in his renunciation of violence is not limited to any one subset of the church, but extends to the entire community by definition; for 'pacifism is not the prophetic vocation of a few individuals, but [rather] every member of the body of Christ is called to' it in the one call of discipleship.³⁰ What then is the church's mission in the world? According to Yoder, it is to embody, in the church's life together, God's new and coming way, as revealed in Jesus' pattern of life and in his death and resurrection – and this, *on behalf of the world precisely as an alternative to it*. This vision is 'the original revolution': 'the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them'.³¹ In the midst of the old world, 'The believing community is the new world on the way.'³²

Moreover, the church is not, as some would have it, apolitical in contrast to 'political' communities; as one political community³³ in the midst of others, the church is *politically paradigmatic*. 'The alternative community discharges a modeling mission. The church is called to be now what the world is called

²⁹ See John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, rev. edn (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), esp. pp. 133–8 for his own position, what he calls 'the pacifism of the messianic community'.

³⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), p. 72. The quotation continues, regarding the 'it' to which all Christians are called: 'absolute nonresistance in discipleship and . . . abandonment of all loyalties which counter that obedience'.

³¹ Yoder, *Original Revolution*, p. 28.

³² John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 50.

³³ Yoder's shorthand definition is 'a structured social body'. For further discussion, see his *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), pp. viii, vi–xi.

to be ultimately',³⁴ for 'the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called'.³⁵

The church's role is not limited, however, to merely showing or evincing this alternative way, for it is a legitimate offer to the world – in the sense both of joining the church's life and of modelling the world's life on that of the church. On the one hand, the church's challenge is 'so to purify and clarify and exemplify [its witness] that the world can perceive it to be good news without having to learn a foreign language'.³⁶ This is the practice of evangelism.³⁷ On the other hand, 'the order of the faith community constitutes a public offer to the entire society'.³⁸ Some of Yoder's favourite examples include the way the church mediates conflict through binding and loosing, integrates differences through baptism, and makes decisions through open conversation. These and other practices serve as a model for other communities to learn from and imitate – and indeed, many have done so historically. This is the leaven of the church's social witness.³⁹

³⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 92.

³⁵ Yoder, *Body*, p. ix. Cf. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, p. 92: 'The church is thus not chaplain or priest to the powers running the world: she is called to be a microcosm of the wider society, not only as an idea, but also in her function.'

³⁶ Yoder, *Nations*, p. 24. The church can do this, says Yoder, because '[t]he calling of the people of God is . . . no different from the calling of all humanity'.

³⁷ Yoder treats this issue delicately and superbly in his essay, "'But We Do See Jesus": The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth' (*Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 46–62), in which he argues for the historical contextuality of the missionary gospel and the inevitable particularity of truth claims. On the ground, this entails taking cultural raw materials for granted and then reworking them according to the logic of the gospel. For example: 'To ask, "Shall we talk in pluralist/relativist terms?" would be as silly as to ask in Greece, "Shall we talk Greek?" The question is what we shall say.' Thus: 'We are now called to renew in the language world of pluralism/relativism an analogue to what those first transcultural reconceptualizers [the apostles and writers of the New Testament] did; not to translate their results but to emulate their exercise' (p. 56). Note well the similarities to Tanner's argument in *Theories of Culture*.

³⁸ Yoder, *Nations*, p. 27 (de-italicised). In context, Yoder is explicating a claim he finds in Barth, but with approval.

³⁹ See also Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 151–95; *Nations*, pp. 15–93; and (for concise example) his *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), p. 364: 'The multiplicity of gifts is a model for the empowerment of the humble and the end of hierarchy in social process. Dialogue under the Holy Spirit is the ground floor of the notion of democracy. The admonition to bind or loose at the point of offense is the foundation for what now would be called conflict resolution and consciousness raising.' See also Yoder's comment in his *The End of Sacrifice: The Capital Punishment Writings of John Howard Yoder*, ed. John C. Nugent (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), p. 126: 'we must refuse to concede

The picture at this point may seem rather heroic, not to mention disproportionately self-concerned or cut off from the world. Yoder's pacifism has not gone by the wayside, however, and this commitment keeps his balancing act from tipping over, in two important respects.

First, over against certain 'visible culture' ecclesiologies,⁴⁰ Yoder is profoundly non-alarmist. Not only is the church not responsible for something called 'civilisation' – and thus not hysterical at the supposed crumbling of its foundations – the presence and activity of God are not limited to the church's bounds. In Yoder's famous phrase, 'people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe'.⁴¹ What this means is that there are never grounds for despair, including and especially regarding the church, because what seems like failure is, for a God who gives life to the dead, never the last word or as evident as it may seem. The church must learn, in Yoder's words, '[t]o see history doxologically',⁴² that is, to remember that the resort to violence is precluded by patient trust in the providence of God. The future of church, society and world is in the hands of the living God, not in ours. Only let the church be faithful in its time and place.

"ownership" of the "human" to those who deny creation and redemption. The God of creation, making humankind in his image, was the first humanist. The story of the "humanization" of Western culture – limping, imperfect as it is, but real – is part of the work of the God of Abraham, Father of Jesus, partly done through his body, the church. That humanization of cultures is not the same as the salvation of individual souls, nor is it the same as the praise of God in gatherings for worship, nor is it the same as the coming of the ultimate kingdom of God, but it is a fruit of the gospel for which we should be grateful, and for whose furtherance we are responsible.'

⁴⁰ See e.g. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 128, 134: 'It was thus, rather than by intentional effort, that biblical religion helped produce democracy and science, as well as other values Westerners treasure; and it is in similarly unimaginable and unplanned ways, if at all, that biblical religion will help save the world (for Western civilization is now world civilization) from the demonic corruptions of these same values'; 'the vitality of Western societies may well depend in the long run on the culture-forming power of the biblical outlook in its intratextual, untranslatable specificity'.

⁴¹ Yoder, 'Armaments and Eschatology', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988), p. 58. This quote has been made famous by its use as an epigraph to Stanley Hauerwas' *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), p. 6. Cf. Yoder's rhetorically similar comment in *Original Revolution*, p. 159: 'We are not marching to Zion because we think that by our own momentum we can get there. But that is still where we are going. We are marching to Zion because, when God lets down from heaven the new Jerusalem prepared for us, we want to be the kind of persons and the kind of community that will not feel strange there.'

⁴² Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, pp. 128–40.

Mention of providence and patience leads, second, to Yoder's belief that the church's vocation to peace entails a 'nonviolent epistemology'⁴³ which refuses to issue sure answers in advance of the slow, *ad hoc*, inductive processes of 'dialogical vulnerability'.⁴⁴ Yoder judges the drive to secure the church's existence, much less its language and culture, to be as futile as it is unfaithful: even if it were possible, it is not the way of Christ. No, the God of incarnation, of the messy lives and sordid sagas of Israel's fathers, mothers, kings and prophets – this God is self-committed to the temporal character of human finitude, to the time-taking muddle of social-historical process, both within the church and without.

On the one hand, this means that the church is no more 'safe' than the world: not only is it judged by God, it is fallible, peccable, defectible. As Yoder puts it: 'Fundamental unfaithfulness within history is not only hypothetically possible; it has happened, and it is we who have done it.'⁴⁵ On the other hand, the church's defectibility need not be cause for alarm. It is instead, like unity, a charge and a task. The community checks its temptation to idolatry and disobedience through constant return to scripture. Yoder calls this ongoing process 'looping back' or 'reaching back',⁴⁶ an 'appeal to a prior commonality against an innovation', for scripture is 'witness to the historical baseline of the communities' origins and thereby [a] link to the historicity of their Lord's past presence'.⁴⁷ In this way '*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*' names Christians' ability 'to become aware that we do not do what [the scriptural witness] says, and that the dissonance we thereby create enables our renewal'.⁴⁸

⁴³ See the recently edited collection of essays by Yoder, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Christian E. Early and Ted G. Grimsrud (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

⁴⁴ See John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb*, ed. Glen Harold Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation and Mark Hamsher (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 112. The full phrases Yoder uses are 'second-mile dialogical readiness' (p. 111, de-italicised) and 'second-mile dialogical vulnerability' (p. 112), which he elaborates as 'itself a form of the love of the enemy' (p. 111) insofar as '[...]ove of enemy heightens the reason to give him the benefit of the doubt' (p. 112). Along these lines, the work of Rowan Williams comes to mind as a site of further conversation; see e.g. the essays collected in *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000). For an initial foray, see Joseph R. Wiebe, 'Fracturing Evangelical Recognitions of Christ: Inheriting the Radical Democracy of John Howard Yoder with the Penumbra Vision of Rowan Williams', in *The New Yoder*, ed. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), pp. 294–316.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁶ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, p. 71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

To conclude, the church for Yoder is a community whose mission marks it off from the world for the world's own benefit, even as it remains a creature in history. It is a community of sinners continuously refashioned in correspondence to Jesus of Nazareth, unfinished until the end and so qualified eschatologically. Finally, it is a community that has renounced the means of privilege and coercion both in its relation to the world and in its life together; which is to say that the church *in via* is constituted in all its historical variety by *ongoing non-violent negotiation*, that is, by peaceful converse within itself and with others – not unlike a community of argument.

An undefensive presence in and for the world

Though I have gestured at points, if only rhetorically, to similarities between Tanner and Yoder in their respective ecclesiologies, my goal has not been to present them as merely doing the same thing, much less as synonymous. Such a view would clearly be false, not to mention uninteresting. Rather, I have sought to offer condensed summaries of their visions of the church in all their particularity, difference and idiosyncratic detail. Only now do I want to put them into sympathetic and constructive conversation. Specifically, I believe there are three theological moves shared between Tanner and Yoder in their ecclesiologies, moves worth attending to as structurally organising loci for the whole. These in turn culminate in a fundamental ecclesial posture which I will commend as an antidote to the current ecclesiological gridlock. I will conclude with brief mention of the abiding differences between the two theologians, the ways in which the strengths of each make up for or push against weaknesses in the other, and finally how the ineliminable tension between them might be productive rather than congestive.

The first move is a basic insistence on the priority of divine transcendence. The influence of Barth is discernible here,⁴⁹ in a paradoxical *playfulness* which professes an unwavering trust in God's control of history, even as this apparent

⁴⁹ As a representative comment from one of Barth's chief living interpreters, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 165: 'It is not theology but the peace of God which keeps the hearts and minds of the community. Guarded by God, the community cannot and need not guard itself, because it is protected by the divine indicatives: "The peace of God will keep your hearts and your minds . . . The God of peace will be with you" (Phil 4:7, 9)'. For some of Tanner's engagements with Barth, see *God and Creation*, pp. 77–99 (*passim*); 'Creation and Providence', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (New York: CUP, 2000), pp. 111–26; 'Barth and the Economy of Grace', in Daniel L. Migliore (ed.), *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 176–97. For some of Yoder's, see the writings collected in his *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003).

abdication of human responsibility functions to motivate total engagement in the world's workings. For Tanner⁵⁰ and Yoder,⁵¹ the church must be wholly bound over to the world's good in its mission and ministry, contesting injustice and imagining alternatives to the status quo, all the while radically free of worry or despair, as sentiments unbecoming a people whose origin, sustenance and destiny are outside of itself. The community of the free God need not fret or alarm; let it rather attend to its neighbours, to the challenges of the here and now, in fulfilment of its task.

Context is therefore crucial in the determination of the church's life. As Yoder puts it, 'there is no scratch from which to start'.⁵² Tanner unfolds this non-foundationalist theme in her account of the church as impure, mixed, a hybrid of transfigured practices parasitic on other forms of life. Ingredient in both portrayals, and so the second theological move, is a commitment to history, to the nitty-gritty everyday of social-historical process, in all its diversity, untidiness and frailty. Tanner and Yoder have little patience for abstractions and projections, say, of rule-governed cultural wholes or of perfected heavenly communions, which tend to be empirically untrue or practically unhelpful, or both. The positive side of this impatience is a dependably generous orthodoxy which in principle refuses ecclesial closure,⁵³ not least for the church's own identity. Both in their own way work tirelessly to make space for listening to minority voices in the community, whether they be the silenced or anathematised voices of church history, in Yoder's case,⁵⁴ or the marginalised and sidelined voices of church life today,

⁵⁰ See e.g. Tanner, *Politics of God*, pp. 223, 235: 'In a community of those owed basic respect, one leaves oneself open to the unanticipatable influences of genuine others. One's relations with these others are not defensive, as if truth and goodness were already one's own possession and one had simply to guard them against others'; '[h]ope in God when joined with a knowledge of one's own finitude is a counterintuitive hope that presumes . . . a full recognition of . . . difficulties. It does not help one to overlook them, it helps one to cope with them, by countering an action-paralyzing anxiety that might otherwise arise should such difficulties recur or appear insurmountable.'

⁵¹ See e.g. the essays contained in the final section of *The War of the Lamb*, pp. 123–98, titled 'Effective Peacemaking Practices: The Case for Proactive Alternatives to Violence'. More or less every essay in *For the Nations* speaks to this theme as well.

⁵² Yoder, *Nations*, p. 10. This is a common rhetorical point of entry for Yoder in his essays; see e.g. *Nations*, p. 197; *Sacrifice*, p. 81; *To Hear the Word*, 2nd edn (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), pp. 95, 148.

⁵³ See again Healy, *Church*, p. 72: 'The theodramatic horizon [which Healy proposes as the perspectival approach for ecclesiology] removes the possibility of any closure for Christian existence to the other side of the eschaton'.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 105–47; 'Conclusions Concerning the Discipline of Theology', in *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI:

in Tanner's.⁵⁵ The church, in short, is never fully itself when any of its members are kept out of the conversation.⁵⁶

The generative root of these first two moves, and hence the third and final one, is the christological heart of Tanner's and Yoder's theologies: the incarnation of God the Word. The whole of Jesus' life and teachings is decisive for the character, the politics, of the community which bears his name.⁵⁷ Christ is indeed 'the key',⁵⁸ morally and epistemically not least. The church's identity and mission are, accordingly, christocentric, but for just that reason the church cannot be myopic, turned in on itself, for by grace it is turned out to the world. Moreover, Jesus is pre-eminently the forerunner and messenger of the kingdom, to which the church is both subordinate and called to testify. For Yoder, the church is exemplary insofar as it is the herald, model or

Brazos Press, 2002), pp. 377–405; 'The Burden and the Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism', in Louise Hawkey (ed.), *Nonviolent America: History through the Eyes of Peace* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993), pp. 21–37.

⁵⁵ Tanner's *Politics of God* is one long exercise in this vein, just as *Theories of Culture* supplies the methodology for the approach. See her representative reflections in *Politics*, pp. 252, 253: 'Historically marginalized forms of Christian discourse remain in circulation, waiting to be appropriated for sociopolitical purposes. . . . In [certain] historically marginalized places one may very well discover resources for Christian teachings about God and the world that help avoid the politically oppressive or escapist effects of traditional theism.' In a word, this may be called 'reconstructing Christian teaching along historically marginalized lines' (p. 253), which is wholesale 'in the business of cultural revolution, to the end of social change, in the service of greater justice' (p. 257). See also her comments in the Preface, *Politics*, pp. xii–x.

⁵⁶ I again signal the ripe connections to be made to the theology of Rowan Williams, in particular (though one could choose nearly any of his writings at random) his essay 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics', in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 239–64. It is worth mentioning also Tanner's high praise for Williams' book; see her review in *Anglican Theological Review* 83/1 (2001), pp. 161–3. For instance, she says that, '[r]ead together', the book's essays' 'recurring themes become an . . . elegant interwoven tapestry, systematic theology at its best – spiritually and intellectually rich with a coherence that resists simple formulas' (p. 161).

⁵⁷ Tanner's chapter on 'Politics' in *Christ the Key*, pp. 207–46, is a nice point of reference for comparison to Yoder's masterwork, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994). Tanner argues that 'it would be better to steer attention away from trinitarian relations when making judgments about the proper character of human ones in Christian terms. Christology (specifically, a discussion of the character of Jesus' relationships with other people) is the better avenue for making such judgments: it is less misleading, far simpler, and much more direct' (pp. 207–8). A careful explication of Tanner's and Yoder's christological politics would be a worthwhile exercise in itself. (I might also add that, if nothing else, putting Tanner and Yoder into conversation is called for simply in virtue of their having written books titled, respectively, *The Politics of God* and *The Politics of Jesus*.)

⁵⁸ For her explanation of the use of this image, see Tanner, *Christ*, pp. vii–ix.

foretaste of the kingdom,⁵⁹ defined as ‘the new world, to which the church witnesses and from which its being is derived’.⁶⁰ Likewise, Tanner calls the church ‘the vanguard’⁶¹ and ‘foretaste of the kingdom, the place where the kingdom comes, enters the world, so as to radiate out, or draw all within, for the well-being of everyone’.⁶² For both, then, the church is to show forth that which Jesus proclaimed and embodied: the rule of God rushing in to bring the eschatological future to bear on the present in unpredictable and astonishing ways. Christ thus doubly turns the church’s gaze in line with his own: to the world in mission, to the kingdom in witness. In sum: the church is never an end in itself.

On this reading of Tanner and Yoder, the fundamental posture of the church is radically *undefensive*. By the grace of God’s Spirit, therefore, the church is the undefensive presence of Christ’s body in and for the world. There are multiple inflections worth elucidating here. The church is undefensive *attitudinally*, in its stance vis-à-vis the wider culture: it need not be on edge about its status in society, trigger happy in rhetorical self-defence. The church is undefensive *epistemically*, in its testimony to the gospel: the truth of its witness need not be protected because the object of its witness is himself the Truth, who resisted not but gave himself freely for our sake. The church is undefensive *morally*, in its concrete relations with others: the first reflex of this community cannot be tit for tat, eye for eye, but rather must be blessing for curse, forgiveness for harm, love for hostility. Finally, the church is undefensive *constitutionally*, in its eccentric identity: who and what it is, is absolutely secure, impregnable, unthreatened by any mortal foe, because it is in God and not in itself. The church is thus liberated, unbound to all self-concern and anxiety, and so free to get on with the good work God in Christ has given it to do for the sake of the world.⁶³

⁵⁹ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 106.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁶¹ Tanner, ‘Response’, p. 229.

⁶² Kathryn Tanner, ‘In Praise of Open Communion: A Rejoinder to James Farwell’, *Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), pp. 473–85 (478).

⁶³ Having already flagged Rowan Williams as a potential addition to this conversation, let me note another contemporary theologian: the Barthian quoted above, John Webster. If Yoder and Tanner simultaneously give priority to divine transcendence and seek to offer an account of the church in its irreducibly human, temporal, constructive and at times feeble aspect – a balance Williams attempts as well – Webster pushes in the other direction, seeking to follow the order of being in ecclesiology and so to give fundamental priority to God’s agency in theological talk of the church. Discussion of what ‘constitutes’ the church humanly speaking is thus, as a matter of fundamental conviction, secondary – for it is the triune God who creates, sustains and perfects the church – even if it nevertheless retains its own (qualified, anticipated, subordinated)

What, then, of the remaining differences and tensions between Tanner and Yoder in their understandings of the church? In Tanner, for example, there is an oddly unnamed first person plural at work, an ‘anonymous we’.⁶⁴ This is no doubt a consequence of her consistently universal focus, but at times it can also result in a blurring of the lines of those who have and those who have not responded to God’s grace;⁶⁵ this in turn can have the effect of encroaching on the religious and cultural particularity of non-Christians, while so reducing the role and visibility of the church that it begins to vanish from view. What is needed is a robust theology of *peoplehood*, funded by careful scriptural interpretation of the calling and purposes of Israel and *ekklesia* precisely within the cosmic scope of God’s mission to bless and redeem all of creation.⁶⁶

The work of Yoder supplies just these supplementary needs. On his view, one speaks of the church as such only and always for the sake of its commissioning by Christ ‘to be in itself the beginning of what is to come’ in the kingdom.⁶⁷ And it is worth noting that, if the church seems peripheral in Tanner’s more formal systematic theological writing,⁶⁸ her occasional essays on Anglican polity and sacramental practice, as well as her ongoing work as a

integrity. Webster’s challenge is thus partly a difference of approach, but not only so. His perspective is therefore an important one to attend to in the sort of reflection on the church in view here in the work of Yoder and Tanner. For his writings on the matter, see John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 191–230; *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 53–76; *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 153–93; ‘“In the Society of God”’: Some Principles of Ecclesiology’, in Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 200–22. For something of a third way, with a mind to both sides and cognisant of the ecclesiological trajectories in play, see Nicholas M. Healy, ‘Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003), pp. 287–308.

⁶⁴ See e.g. the account of the missions of Son and Spirit in *Christ the Key*, pp. 159–60. The use of an unspecified ‘us’ (as the grammatical object and thus personal recipient of God’s missions of blessing) is pervasive.

⁶⁵ This blurring of the lines brings to mind a kind of universalising of Schleiermacher’s division of the fellowship of believers into an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer fellowship’. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2011), p. 525.

⁶⁶ In this regard, see e.g. Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁶⁷ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, p. 126.

⁶⁸ Tanner makes a suggestive comment in ‘Response’, p. 228, when she says that *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* ‘contains no chapter on the church’ ‘[i]n imitation of pre-modern

member of the Episcopal House of Bishops' Theology Committee,⁶⁹ confirm her agreement that Christians must think about the church if they want to be the church faithfully. Ecclesiology exists, however, entirely in service of the *missio dei*, encapsulated in that staggering proclamation of Revelation 11:15: 'The kingdom of the world . . . become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ'.⁷⁰

For Yoder's part, his rhetoric can indeed give the impression that the church is an end in itself; that God is ecclesiocentric, and we should be too.⁷¹ His church can seem superhuman: non-violent to the point of death, unflinching in respectful dialogue, dispossessive of resources – nothing less than the 'pulpit and paradigm' of 'the new humanity'.⁷² To be sure, areas in his corpus push against this heroic or ideal image, such as his portrayal of salvation's universal scope⁷³ or his material engagements with non-Christian sources.⁷⁴ These can be drowned out or lost, however, in the exalted language used for the church as well as the attention devoted to it.

theologies (such as that of Aquinas), but perhaps not for the same pre-modern reasons'. Perhaps Tanner's project may be read as a return to presuming the church in Christian theology, such that it need not be thematised, because the focus is (or ought to be) on God's and our 'action in the world', not on ourselves considered as a subject unto itself.

⁶⁹ Some of the group publications to which Tanner's name is attached (along with others) include: Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, 'Reflections on Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist: A Response to Resolution D084 of the 75th General Convention' (www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/House_of_Bishops_on_Open_Table.pdf); Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, 'The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective' (www.archive.episcopalchurch.org/documents/theologycomreport.pdf); Office of Communication, the Episcopal Church Center, New York, 'To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶135' (www.archive.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ToSetOurHope_eng.pdf).

⁷⁰ Biblical citations taken from the New Revised Standard Version; here with the alternative reading of 'Christ' for 'Messiah'.

⁷¹ Yoder, *Nations*, p. 240.

⁷² See Yoder's essay, 'The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm', *ibid.*, pp. 37–50.

⁷³ Recall the recurrent language Yoder uses e.g. in *Body Politics*: the church prefigures or proleptically instantiates the divine call issued to all the world, as a promise of what God will in fact bring to pass for all of creation.

⁷⁴ E.g. the peace witness of Gandhi or non-religious arguments against capital punishment; see John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence: A Brief History*, ed. Paul Martens, Matthew Porter and Myles Werntz (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 22–6, 30–2, 40–2; Yoder, *End of Sacrifice*, *passim*.

Tanner's persistent focus on grace – and with it the oneness of God, the goodness of the world and the sinfulness of humanity – is thus a welcome check against this tendency towards ecclesial idealisation at the world's expense. As she puts it, Christians 'are always . . . as much outsiders as insiders to a life in Christ, in that they continue to depend, as any sinner would, on God's free grace'. The 'difference between Christians and non-Christians', therefore, 'is not a natural or achieved difference', which means that 'Christians . . . can[not] congratulate themselves on the possession of some unique perfection'. A crucial Tannerian test for all ecclesiologies, then, including Yoder's, is whether '[t]he world outside is simply left behind rather than redeemed by Christ'.⁷⁵

In concluding I want to reiterate that Tanner and Yoder need not and, indeed, cannot be harmonised, nor can a higher synthesis be produced out of these two in some Hegelian hat trick. The absence of sheer agreement need not be construed as a problem, however,⁷⁶ for it is precisely in the gap opened between them, in the tension between their projects, that the constructive work is to be done.⁷⁷ As Tanner argues, it is not what has already been said, but how we use what has been said that makes all the difference. The contention of this article is that, going forwards, a crucial locus of productive ecclesiological thought is located at the intersection of just these two trajectories, both where they overlap and where they part ways.

In sum, and put positively, I have argued in this article that the respective ecclesiologies of Kathryn Tanner and John Howard Yoder may together serve as a rich resource for contemporary theological thought about the church's mission and identity, especially for those desiring to break or elide what I termed above the 'holiness versus kenosis' divide. Specifically, Tanner and Yoder share certain theological moves in their presentation of the church, moves which I suggest can function as a sort of delimited area of investigation, a determinate track along which certain types of ecclesiological inquiry can, in all their diversity, run with edifying results. The telos of these moves is an ecclesial posture with the potential, first, to discipline theological discourse on the church in its temptations to rhetorical exaggeration and vapid self-concern; and, second, to order the church's actual life on the

⁷⁵ Tanner, *Theories*, p. 101. Elsewhere, Tanner phrases the claim this way: 'Being witnesses to and disciples of Christ does not allow us to escape the ambiguous world but puts us, at least ideally, more responsibly within it'. See Kathryn Tanner, 'Theological Reflection and Christian Practices', in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 228–42 (233).

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 122.

⁷⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 112, 90.

ground in practicable and faithful ways. This posture is that of an undefensive presence in the world; a people replete with gifts for neighbours, friends and enemies. Hence the unworried shrug at the notion of guarding the church doors, of posting sentinels to watch. Such a community abides in God, and so leaves its borders unsecured as a rule.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Thanks to Spencer Bogle, Garrett East, Andrew Forsyth, Mark Lackowski, Stephen Lawson and Ross McCullough for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article.