

# NEW YORK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

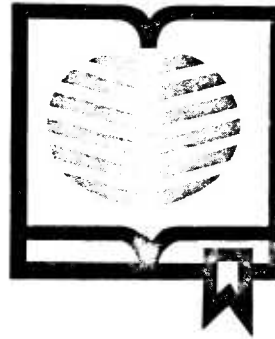
CONTINUING THE BIBLICAL SEMINARY IN NEW YORK

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*Open Letter to*

JOHN H. YODER, president  
Goshen Theological Seminary

29 Sept 76



WILLIS E. ELLIOTT, Dean  
Exploratory Programs

Dear John--

I miss those long talks we used to have--e.g., in Faith and Life [WCC/NCC]. May our paths cross soon again!

This letter is to set side by side two documents of yours: ...your urbane, deeply convictioned, gentle addendum to "A Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern" [18 Feb 74 C&C], and ...what you say about me in your THE POLITICS OF JESUS [Eerdmans/72], 99f.

1. In the former, you plead that the Declaration be understood "in context," and of course as an old biblical scholar I couldn't agree more. You do not, however, follow your own hermeneutical principle in the latter case. As an original signer of the Declaration, you support social-political involvement of Christians, yet fail in your book to credit me with doing just that in the Jesus-and-violence debate of the late 1960s: the context of my statements [which are better put elsewhere, and before, than in the article you mention] was precisely my entering into the agony of the poor and oppressed of that time, and in consequence losing my post in the national office of my denomination. Now you, and many others of my old friends [Carl Henry, e.g.], are preaching involvement as hard as I've been since before World War II--and for which the Evangelicals through the years till now have condemned me...an ironic satisfaction! The literary-contextual fact is that people of my general understanding of Jesus were deeply involved in political witness [word and deed], but people of other understandings of Jesus were uninvolved--or at least too shallowly involved to cost them much.

2. Thus the cross question becomes the question of the cost of discipleship. Your analysis of Jesus' political options has a sterile, aseptic, rationalistic quality. In converting Jesus into a German political philosopher you succumb to "the peril of modernizing Jesus" [title of Cadbury's 1937 classic]...Which brings me to the moment I first laid hands on your book and said to myself, "This is depressing! I've got to read it, but it's sure to be ho-hum, because John won't be asking the open question of Jesus and politics but the closed question 'How can I update, for myself and my people, my understanding of Jesus as pacifist?'" On your life, I knew the effect would be the opposite of the cross: your folk would give you stroking [not strikes, blows] for confirming their notions and providing them with an academic patina. Something cheap here, almost smelly.

3. I hasten to add my gratitude for the solidity [if stolidity], carefulness [though ideology] of the book, which finds all the pieces [which we used to call "mcn"], puts them on the board, and plays well. I thank you..

4. Pursuant of this ideology, you narrow the cross-symbol down to signal your pacifist doctrine--much as Sun Moon narrows several biblical symbols down to signal his "Divine Principle." You support this with your Ur-theory of [95n] "the common primitive Jesus story," in which Jesus preaches your doctrine as triumphantly as the later books of Hugh Schonfield figment an Ur-story for his [Hugh's, not Jesus'!] doctrine. The fact that this is done, in your book, with profuse scholarly sweat does not add to the nobility of the effort--though it does help account for your arrogant sniffing at others, including me, whom you presume to have sweat less ["journalistic....skipping over the challenge of the collision with traditional interpretations"]. Alas, making Jesus look and feel like one's own genes and politics never ceases, and all in the name of "biblical interpretation." No, I'm not excluding myself. There's a passionate, pell-mell quality about me; and my seeing this in Jesus, when I was 17, was a heavy factor in my Evangelical conversion.

5. So, man, there you have it: Jesus, instead of acting on well-thought-out conclusions from a planning process, was pell-mell passionate in announcing the full-coming full-come Kingdom of God, while himself being inwardly full of God's shalom and joy. The Spirit, who was cooler in the whole business [more like you!], prepared him gradually to take the consequences of his impetuosity.\* Lonely consequences: cross and resurrection. Can I do as good a job of reading that out of the gospels as you did reading your Jesus out of the gospels? That depends only on whether I've as sharp and well-furnished a brain as you; and whether that's so is a matter of indifference, even to me.

6. I'm not as agnostic as paragraph #5 may sound to you. I believe that a comprehensive interpretive methodology [by the way, the title of the thesis of my first doctorate] helps deliver us from mirror-reading, from subjectivism, from tendentious argumentation. For exposition, I don't mind selection of passages and stresses, and even omissions; for exegesis, I do. [I note, e.g., that neither you nor George Edwards (JESUS AND THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE [Harper/72]) wrestles with the nettle of M.9.1 as such. On another aspect of George's work, as it touches me, see thinksheet #86L, attached.]

7. Your "politicizing" of Jesus has the paradoxical effect of depoliticizing your Christians for a significant sector of the action-options range, viz. the right of rebellion [Declaration of Independence, e.g.] through physical force, both resistance and aggression. I agree with your statement on the NY limits of imitatio [p.97]: In NT, "only at one point, only on one subject...is Jesus our example: in his cross," "the price of his social non-conformity...the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come." But on the next page you capture Jesus for your ideology--and refuse him to liberation theologians--by claiming that "at the outset" he rejected axiomatically, sweepingly, all alternatives but yours: (1) quietism ["social withdrawal"], (2) establishmentarianism ["conservative social responsibility"], and (3) violence ["the...attractive option of the crusade"]. Interestingly, you fail to mention the just-war option, the counsel of moderation under the strictures of just cause, correct authority, proportionality, civilian non-combatancy immunity, and--I add--minimal adequate cost in pain and loss of life, limb, and property (on which see my United Ministries in Higher Education pamphlet, "VIOLENCE: No Resort or Last Resort or...?"--herewith--from which the article you quote was derived and somewhat distorted, as e.g. by the omission of the word "effective" in my title: RENEWAL, without my permission, printed it as "No Alternative to Violence," instead of "No Effective Alternative to Violence"--effective as "adequate.").

8. In the eyes of liberation theologians, you cannot, as you try to, exclude

\*My 1973 review, enclosed.

\*Thinksheet #70.

yourself from the category of quietism. Surely you are aware that quietism cannot be limited to "social withdrawal"--instance Jn. Woolman! Even if a particular dictionary so limits the term, its meaning vis-a-vis liberation theology is anti-violence, whether the anti-violent are uninvolved or involved, since to be anti-violent in a situation in which violence is God-called-for is to be, functionally, uninvolved, no matter how involved philosophically the anti-violent may consider themselves. ["Nonviolence" and "pacifism" are not the same as this anti-violence, though they overlap with it.]

9. The sociopolitical context of my late '60s writings on violence was one in which Christians were being pulled apart intrapsychically and communally --one force ["the Establishment"] asking us to condemn violence mindlessly, but also philosophically and theologically and ethically and morally, and thus put outside the pale all who were going violent [meaning niggers, in contradistinction to (good, meaning nonviolent) Negroes]; the other force ["the radicals," etc.] asking us to identify, as the prophets and our Lord, with the poor, whose oppression had so risen in their hearts and minds and gall that they could no longer resist the urge to violence. I was enraged at the prostititional sell-out of one "Church leader" after another condemning not the root of the riots, but the riots themselves, thus reinforcing the government's outrageous distortions [as LBJ's "We will not reward violence," which was as mendacious as his "Might will not make right" applied to Vietnam: Martin Luther King felt, then saw, then spoke the connection]. Where were you in all this, man? Your reading of Jesus excluded you from identifying with, standing with and on the side of, the oppressed who could take not more--did it not? If I read your early-'70s book aright, you were prostituting your splendid powers as a biblical theologian to the interests of the Establishment. To put it bluntly: as I see it, you were on the wrong side. [I hope you can tell me I'm wrong about you!]

10. Your book fishes the sea of scholars for all the clever qualifiers of Schweitzer's claim, and--as far as my research goes--none escaped your net. Scholars against you you tend to relegate to footnotes....In what category will you put me? I fit none of your categories! Least of all the violent "crusader"! The world is an occasionally exploding volcano of violence, and I'm for the minimum of physical coercion effective to truly human ends --to keep to the figure, for a minimum of lava side-flow, in almost all situations. [Radicals would almost always be right in calling me thus "counter-revolutionary."] "Crusader" would be a better term for those who moralize against violence and thus support Establishments, all of which legislate against violence while legalizing their systemic violence. My energy went, and goes, (1) to exposing Establishment fraud vis-a-vis violence, and (2) to preaching God's love. The first, for the God of Truth; the second, because [as your Declaration states] "God requires love...to those suffering social abuses." Now, the truth is that Establishments are very responsive to violence threats they think have a chance of seriously destabilizing society [read, "dislodging them"]. In my terms, the violence of the oppressed in '60s America was "effective," did "move the system" to threat-depressing legislation in civil/human rights, so that the center of pro-human violence was shifted from against the Establishment to, to a significant extent, within the Establishment: jurisprudence is now operating more for than against liberation. We've made "progress through nonviolence, threats of violence, and violence. All three are essential to further progress." [The quotation is from my 10 Aug 67 NEW YORK TIMES LETTER, which started a series of events that finally lost me my UCBHM job.] I'm not satisfied with our progress, but I thank God for such of it as we have-- and believe King would be first to laugh if someone were to suggest that we could have come this far without such actions as his violent threat to

the existence of the Montgomery Bus Corporation. [Here I use "violence" precisely to mean destruction. King did not burn buses. If he had, that would not have been violent in the ultimate sense, for the buses were insured. King used the only possible violence, precisely at the point where the corporation could get no insurance, viz. on its existence. King felt "nonviolent" only to those who never came within the force-field of his violence. The genius of his violence was that instead of being anti-systemic it was counter-systemic, judoish, approaching from an undefended --indeed, indefensible--side of the System. Now, on your terms, was King wrong in using Jesus as a sanctioner of this violence? Certainly he was, on your theory and your construct of [p.94] "an ethical-social Jesus whose words and work, life and death, consistently project and make real a particular pattern of presence in the world."]

11. I'm wholly with you in your yearning and sweating toward a normative Jesus, and I accept your adjective "ethical-social" [though reject your rejection of Wilder's treatment of the hyphen]. However, I suspect this is one of those things God wants us to yearn and sweat for and never get. I'm against ebionitic and decetic evasions of the search, however: the former limits his relevance to his status as radical rabbi, and the latter divorces him not just from our situation-in-world but from our humanity itself. But I accuse you of modernizing Jesus into an ideologue who lays a generalizing trip: "God's will for God's man in this world is that he should renounce legitimate defense" (p.100). This ideologization is to be expected of "a Christian pacifist" writing a diatribe again "mainline" theology's setting aside what he calls NT pacifism. (p.5). But it is inflexible, anti-situational, and dogmatic to the point of disqualifying the saints in situations in which violence is God-called-for [which does not beg the question as an adjective, but underlines the issue]. In contrast, my view is clear on p.4 of the pamphlet referred to above: "Jesus was only operationally and personally, not ideologically and philosophically, nonviolent." Without question, Jesus threatened violence [the imminent Wrath, as in King and Abernathy on the Poor People's March--crying, "One last chance!"]. His from-the-Establishment-standpoint excessive language contributed to the violence of the public atmosphere--e.g., his preaching a half turn of the wheel ["the first shall be last, the last first"] rather than a quarter turn [reconciliation, the conversion rather than the subordination or destruction of the oppressor]. "I have come to cast fire on the earth!" For all this he was both experienced as unsustainable threat of destabilization, and as (to use the word you use against me and others) "novelty- mongering." ["Novelty" has a dilettant connotation a league away from liberation theology's agonizing on a cross whose upright is identity through identification with "the poor," "the wretched of the earth," and whose transept is identity through identification with the holy heritage and hope.]

12. Which brings me to your narrow use of "the cross," viz. to symbolize Jesus'/your stance vis-a-vis politics-violence. In the public domain, the cross is a symbol for agony through social idealism; in the private, for an inescapable, chronic anguish. Both metaphorical meanings, in my opinion, honor our Lord, though neither, nor both together, exhaust the meaning of his cross. I plead for humble openness here, for the use of Jesus' cross as an open metaphor open to his open wounds and open tomb and to the human potential in all our sufferings, our embattled and darkling decisions, our fumbling but persistent though painful yearnings. Down with Marxist determinism in interpreting suffering [including Marxian rigidity in some liberation theologies], and down with your closing the cross' meaning into your thing! Ironically, you make all the NT's Christian soldiers march rank-file-step in your direction, so your project has a quasi-military quality. ...e.g. in your closing dogmatic statement [p.250]: "A social style charac-

terized by the creation of a new community and the rejection of violence of any kind is the theme of the New Testament proclamation from beginning to end, from right to left. The cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy, the power of God for those who believe." Thus have you made "the cross" into a buzzword for your version of the peace-church Jesus. As an act of loyalty to your sectarian heritage within Christianity, this is admirable; as scholarship, it's less than noble. Yet you seem to me a bit closer to the truth than those equally thorough scholars who've "re-created" a Zealot or at least pro-Zealot Jesus; or Schonfield, equally thorough, whose calculating messianic Jesus is as modernly option-minded as your literal-Sermon-on-the-Mount Jesus.

13. A note on modesty: Your project is both folk-authentic and folk-legitimizing --both, true and valuable; but it pretends to present not an authentic vision of Jesus, but the: that's hubris. As long as great scholars like yourself claim the universal while only serving the parochial, how can we rise to the global challenges of evangelism, mission, service? You speak of ecumenicity, yet perform in such wise as to make the sectarian tradition of your own folk even more dug-in [in spite of your minor criticisms of pietism's temptations to withdrawal-type quietism]. While your Declaration re-opens Evangelicalism to social action, I find in it and in you no significant opening toward us evangelicals who've always been social-action and who now pray for "the New Evangelicals" to repent toward us as well as toward God. [Yes, I have a poor record of success in getting people to repent toward me; a somewhat better record of my repenting toward them.]...I can represent the feel of what I'm saying about universality by referring to Kissinger's UN speech two days ago: "The challenge of statesmanship" is to achieve world order through "the wise and farsighted use of international institutions through which we enlarge the sphere of common interests and enhance the sense of community"--on pain of the inevitable alternative, the ruthless repression of the weak by the strong. In the mini- and maxi-worlds of that threat/promise dynamic, your Jesus and [your version of] his cross are so out of it that, while you can argue that they've not been tried, I can reply that they are so irrelevant as to be untriable. Your Jesus-cross doctrine has proved itself in one world, the world of the embattled sect heart-set on survival: as a sectarian survival doctrine, it's a success. But it's only poignant to push it as a universal ethic of omni-applicability. Poignant, admirable, ineffectual--but an honest paradigm of "Your Kingdom come...on earth."

14. You write a book scoring us for calling on Jesus to legitimate our "own contemporary revolutionary visions" [p.100n]--a book whose purpose is to legitimate your own folk's late-medieval calling on Jesus to legitimate an anti-violent vision! The burden of proof is on you not only because you began this legitimation argument, but also because the history of your folk-with-their-vision does not augur well for universal relevance. Further, since I do not zealotize Jesus, I should not be put in the category of using Jesus to sanction an exonomously arrived at revolutionary vision. Our positions, yours and mine, are both nuanced beyond simple categorizations....In the same fn., you speak of Jesus' "uniqueness" and "originality" in "his rejection (sympathetic, but a clear rejection nonetheless) of the Zealot option." I object both to the e silentio and to your captivity of his allegedly distinctive position to your position. Thank God your folk evolved an adequate survival-ethic under near-genocidal conditions; I'm questioning the extendability of such an ethic into other conditions. [Cp. Jewish theologizing since Holocaust.]

For you and me both, John, "the cross" is the central imitatio symbol. I'm objecting only to your telling me its meaning, rather than staying within the parameters of both faith and scholarship by limiting yourself to sharing with me its meaning for you.

Grace and peace,

