

THE APOCALYPTIC BODY OF CHRIST?

Reflections on Yoder and Apocalyptic Theology by Way of David Foster Wallace

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I have been asked to speak about John Howard Yoder and apocalyptic theology. I will do so by reflecting on Yoder's understanding of the body and its capacity for speech or articulacy—in particular as these themes are reflected in his understanding of the body of Christ. These questions play out somewhat differently in Yoder's work than they do in what we might call apocalyptic theology more generally (whatever that means—and I will admit here, as an aside, that one of my struggles in undertaking this assignment is to figure out just what counts as being representative of the so-called apocalyptic turn in recent theology). This difference would mean that any attempt to enlist Yoder as an ally in support of a program or movement called apocalyptic theology will be awkward at best. If it is appropriate to draw on Yoder in support of apocalyptic theology, it must equally be acknowledged that his work also pushes back against it in some significant ways. To draw attention to Yoder's posture of ambivalence toward academic movements should hardly be necessary, for it has received plenty of attention in recent engagement with his work. I don't want to rehash that ground here. So let us get one thing out of the way at the beginning. Yes, we can find texts in which Yoder emphasizes the category of apocalyptic. But it is also worth noting that he typically qualifies these references by insisting that the category of apocalyptic is only one among many and should not be elevated to become a sort of governing principle. As Yoder himself puts it, "Apocalypse is only one of many modes of discourse in the believing community. We should not prefer it; we should

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use them all.”¹ Call it methodological non-Constantinianism or perhaps something more elegant. But that is not what I want to dwell on today. I am more interested in exploring how the question of apocalyptic theology relates to some of Yoder’s more substantive commitments about the body of Christ and its capacity for speech.

But before I get there, I want to take a short detour into the world of another important thinker who might also be described as being both for and against apocalyptic—namely, David Foster Wallace. In particular, I am interested in how Wallace draws attention to some interesting questions concerning the body and its capacity for speech. It might also be tempting to describe this as a detour that takes us out of the world of theology and into the world of athletics. But this way of putting it is dangerous in that it underwrites the assumption that athletics and theology name two very different realms. Early Christian references to martyrs as athletes of God should make it clear that these were not always understood as separate worlds. Nor do they represent different worlds for Wallace in some interesting ways. So please indulge me as I try to set up a discussion of Yoder and apocalyptic theology by pulling out a few strands from Wallace’s writings on tennis.

Reflecting on the genre of the sports memoir, and in particular that of tennis prodigy Tracy Austin, Wallace observes that these books are often crushingly banal and monotonous in a way that seems at odds with the promise that draws us to read them in the first place. He speaks of athletic performance in religious terms, writing, “There is about world-class athletes carving out exemptions from physical laws a transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man.”² He describes great athletes as hybrids of animal and angel and suggests that their gift be understood as a kind of incarnation. Great athletic performances embody new realities and thus make it possible to see something that in ordinary circumstances remains invisible. But what drives us to seek out their memoirs is that we want something more than their bodily performances. We want to see inside their lives, their minds, to understand what it is that makes their performance possible. Sports memoirs promise to lift the veil so that we can peek inside and discover a language that will enable us to work at enriching our own comparatively inferior performances. And yet this desire typically ends up being frustrated. Books that promise to give us insight into the lives of athletic geniuses usually give us little more than empty clichés. As Wallace puts it, “Great athletes usually turn out to be

1. John Howard Yoder, “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, by John Howard Yoder, ed. Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 129–30.

2. David Foster Wallace, “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little Brown, 2005), 142–43.

stunningly inarticulate about just those qualities and experiences that constitute their fascination."³

It is tempting to explain this phenomenon by invoking a distinction between mind and body. Think of how athletes are often presented as bodily exemplars whose athletic achievements are understood to exist at the cost of a robust life of the mind. Think of the character of the dumb jock and the role it plays in contemporary popular culture. But not only does Wallace find these explanations unconvincing, he thinks they are part of the problem. To associate athletic inarticulacy with diminished mental capacity is to misunderstand the kind of dumbness that is involved here. "It remains very hard for me," Wallace writes, "to reconcile the vapidity of Austin's narrative mind, on the one hand, with the extraordinary mental powers that are required by world-class tennis, on the other."⁴ For Wallace, then, athletic performance does not trade on the rejection of mind as such. Rather, it suggests a different kind of intellectual life. It is not that great athletes are unthinking so much as it is that overthinking tends to produce inferior athletic performances. He suggests that many of us are far too articulate about all the possibilities and complexities involved in our athletic pursuits. Wallace refers to this as a "mind that is prone to self-conscious fear."⁵ This is a mind that is anxious and calculative. It is compelled to give explicit attention to its so-called inner states. Moreover, it is possessed by a need to manage a sort of interior struggle by sorting through one's reasons for action. The minds of great athletes, by contrast, are different insofar as they are capable of steering clear of these sorts of intellectual distractions. They have little to offer that makes their performances intelligible precisely because their actions, unlike ours, do not trade on a calculative process that requires reasons for action to be made articulate. As Wallace puts it, "Those who receive and act out the gift of athletic genius must, perforce, be blind and dumb about it—and not because blindness and dumbness are the price of the gift, but because they are its essence."⁶ Virtuous athletic performance, he suggests, seems to be linked to a kind of dumbness that is not a reflection of intellectual inferiority, but a capacity for a kind of silence. And here, once again, Wallace invokes a religious comparison, suggesting that we might think of these people as "wise and profound, enlightened in the childlike way some saints and monks are enlightened."⁷

Before I return to the question of Yoder and apocalyptic theology, I want to pause briefly to consider a notable exception to this interpretation

3. Wallace, "Tracy Austin," 152.

4. Wallace, "Tracy Austin," 153.

5. Wallace, "Tracy Austin," 154.

6. Wallace, "Tracy Austin," 155.

7. Wallace, "Tracy Austin," 155.

of the genre of sports memoir—namely, that of Lance Armstrong. Armstrong’s books and public persona present a striking contrast to the sort of inarticulacy Wallace finds in Tracy Austin and others. Armstrong built his reputation on an ability to articulate his performances by way of a narrative drama that many found to be not only compelling but inspiring. He was a master at the art of what public relations people call “controlling the narrative.” Of course, as we all know by now, Armstrong’s story was a lie. He deployed his capacity for articulate speech in order to deliver a calculated set of deceptions designed to mask the fact that his athletic performances were essentially fraudulent. Driven by the fear of being caught, he used fear as a weapon against those who dared to tell the truth. And it seems to me that this need to control the narrative continues even in the supposedly new confessional posture that he is now said to be taking. So, to add another wrinkle to Wallace’s reading, Armstrong provides a disturbing example of the extent to which articulacy about bodily performances can be linked to the work of deception. This should leave us feeling unsettled when we are tempted to describe a more honest and truthful account like Austin’s as a disappointment. Or perhaps our disappointment should be that she felt the need to write a memoir in the first place.

So what does all of this have to do with Yoder and the question of apocalyptic theology? First of all, to put it far too schematically, I think it is fair to say that Yoder turns to apocalyptic imagery in contexts that are framed by a desire to explore questions about bodily performance—both collective and individual. Second, he does so in a way that raises significant critical questions about the capacity for articulate speech. Or perhaps a better way to put it is that he really takes seriously what we might call the difficulty of articulate speech. For example, he invokes apocalyptic at those moments where he stresses the importance of being “careful about one’s words in the fear of God.”⁸ Something similar is at work in the account of ecclesial discernment he described as the Rule of Paul. And third, tying these two points together, Yoder is drawn to apocalyptic imagery at precisely those moments where he sets out to challenge presumptions of the need for articulate theological speech and to emphasize the relative dumbness of actions that can be described as faithful. His work is littered with examples of we might call apocalyptic bodily performances—simple acts of nonviolent resistance or actions of those such as Gandhi who would articulate the meaningfulness of their actions in ways that are at odds with Christian theological speech. And it seems to me that one thing these examples do is frustrate the desire to elaborate articulate explanations about them. They don’t allow us to control the narrative. One way to summarize Yoder’s work in this respect is to say that it is alert to the subtle ways things tend to go wrong when we try to surround our actions

8. Yoder, “To Serve Our God,” 140.

with articulate narrative structures. Much like Wallace, Yoder appreciates the sense in which the desire for articulate speech can be seen to arise out of an anxious and calculative need to be too self-conscious about our reasons for action. He appreciates the sense in which our need to explain our actions by giving expression to our so-called inner selves can be distracting at best, and deceptive at worst. Or rather, to turn the point around, Yoder suggests that when anxiety and self-conscious calculation are not operative, where the body of Christ performs gracefully in the way that Wallace's athletes do, the presence of articulate speech is muted, if not altogether absent. And so it is often rendered as being inarticulate, if not dumb, by a more articulate public. I offer all of this as a way of teasing out what is implied in Yoder's claim that "the relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection," a claim frequently cited by those apocalyptically minded thinkers who draw on Yoder's work.⁹ What if this claim draws attention to a kind of athletic theology in a way that is analogous to the notion of athletics suggested by Wallace?

Now, when I read work that is said to be representative of the so-called apocalyptic turn in recent theology, I hear a different range of impulses and concerns. At the risk of oversimplification, let me suggest that one of its overriding concerns seems to be that of securing the possibility of a kind of theological articulacy. It is an attempt to claim a voice for theology in a world (call it the secular) that allegedly seeks to silence, or at least severely limit and contain, the possibility of theological speech. Moreover, this concern for theological articulacy seems to coincide with a diminished interest in the body. Instead, it sets out to establish conditions that explain the possibility of theological speech in a more formal sense. The body is not entirely absent in apocalyptic theology. But it comes and goes in striking ways. To take just one example, Nathan Kerr summarizes his reading of Yoder and apocalyptic by stressing that "the inbreaking of God's reign is made real and available only as a way of *life*, a concrete *practice*, a mode of historic *action*, which 'way of life,' 'practice,' and 'action' constitutively and fundamentally concur as this world's *conversion*."¹⁰ But I find Kerr's subsequent elaboration of this claim to be curiously silent about bodily performance and much more articulate when it comes to providing an account of the formal conditions of historicity and meaning. For example, he writes, "Only as we refuse to grant history a status or meaning apart from the interruptive event of Christ's cross and resurrection, and only as this event itself perpetually conditions history as the site of apocalyptic arrival and inauguration of God's coming reign, can the confession that

9. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 232.

10. Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 2.

'Jesus is Lord' be considered true for us today."¹¹ His project seems to accent the latter quote (about meaning and event) in a way that elides the significance of the former (about the concrete practices of the body). In doing so, it appears as though the body disappears at precisely those moments where it strives to make room for theological speech. When Yoder takes up apocalyptic, I am suggesting it is exactly the other way around. I find Yoder to be instructively uninterested in the need to provide an account of how the confession of Christ's lordship can be true "for our world today."¹² Rather, he is interested in exploring practices of speech that might be appropriate for the body of Christ.

To put all of this a different way, apocalyptic theology of the sort that Kerr represents strikes me as anxious and calculative. It is particularly anxious about the way in which conditions of the secular might interfere with the possibility of theological speech. But as Dan Barber rightly notes, Yoder did not share this kind of anxiety about the secular.¹³ He was not preoccupied with the need to demonstrate that theology can escape the constraining grip of the secular. Rather, he was interested in exploring ways in which theological speech is captured by habits of self-deception. Indeed, his work might be described as an attempt to provide an account of the body of Christ and its capacity to speak that is set against the background of a recognition that we are always already in the grip of some form of self-deception or another.

By way of conclusion, let me try to sum this up by reflecting on the way apocalyptic metaphors of explosion and interruption play out differently in Yoder and apocalyptic theology. As I read the apocalyptic theology represented by Kerr and others, we might say that theology is the subject of interruption. The world of the secular is interrupted by new modes of theological speech that are presented as gifts to the world. With Yoder, by contrast, theology is the object of interruption. It is not so much about interrupting as it is about cultivating a "capacity to be interrupted."¹⁴ Whereas Kerr speaks of witness as a gift that explodes the limits imposed by the world, Yoder's emphasis is on "modes of witness which explode the limits that *our own systems* impose on *our* capacity to be illuminated and led." (emphasis added)¹⁵ Apocalyptic theology is anxious theology. It does not like being silenced. So it interrupts and claims a voice for itself. Yoder, on the other hand, was comfortable with silence,

11. Kerr, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic*, 1.

12. Kerr, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic*, 1.

13. See Daniel Colucci Barber, "Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular," in *The New Yoder*, ed. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 271–293.

14. Romand Coles in Romand Coles and Stanley Hauerwas, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 58.

15. Yoder, "To Serve Our God," 129.

with forms of theological dumbness. His concern was not to establish formal conditions for articulate theological speech. If anything, he set out to identify how patterns of articulate theological speech might be deceptive. For example, I think this is how we are to read his engagement with the just war tradition. If I am right in this reading of apocalyptic theology, then Yoder is at best an ambivalent ally.

Finally, I am well aware that Yoder's work is haunted by its own aura of deception in light of the allegations of sexual misconduct that are once again being given serious attention. Some have even suggested that his theology should be read as an instance of the sort of disingenuous articulacy I associated with Lance Armstrong—an attempt to control the narrative in order to mask an underlying set of deceptions. Some allege that Yoder's work should be read as an attempt to articulate a kind of theological sensibility that somehow served to justify, or at least minimize resistance to, a range of predatory sexual habits. I confess that I am not sure how to answer these sorts of charges. Nor do I think this is the place to do so. But it strikes me as a fitting note of dissatisfaction on which to linger at the end of a discussion such as this.

This essay was first delivered as a paper for a session of the Explorations in Theology and Apocalyptic working group, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Baltimore, 24 November 2013. The topic of the panel was "The One Church: Holy, Catholic, and Apocalyptic."