

AMBS and John Howard Yoder

August 18, 2013

In 2004 I began an email listserv to collect material for a potential biography of my father, Ross Thomas Bender. There were about twenty participants, including as many of my father's former colleagues as I could contact. Also on the listserv were Joe Springer and John D. Roth from the Mennonite Historical Library in Goshen, Indiana, and Sam Steiner from the Conrad Grebel Archives in Waterloo, Ontario. Thus the material on the list was on the record and participants were aware that it was being collected at the two archival sites above.

A small part of the discussion concerned John Howard Yoder at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, particularly during the years when my father was on the faculty as Dean and later Professor of Christian Education. These emails are presented below, with email addresses removed, other than rtb@rossbender.org, which was the server address.

The material demonstrates that there was a good deal of confusion at AMBS (and incidentally at other Mennonite Church institutions) as to how to deal with Yoder's sexual exploits as well as his relationships with the administration and other faculty. There are references to at least two disciplinary committees and to their outcomes, or lack of clear outcomes. Presumably AMBS has archival material such as minutes from these committees. These would be of obvious value to objective historians or investigative journalists.

Requests for the entire correspondence, which lasted for the duration of 2004 and into March of 2005, might be made to the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College. Requests for minutes of the disciplinary committees should be made to Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

Ross Lynn Bender, Ph.D.

Philadelphia, PA

From: Ross Bender

To: rtb@rossbender.org ▸ [Add to Address Book](#)

Sent: Oct 07 '04 10:04am

Subject: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

Several of you have commented to me about the tension between Dad and JHY, particularly in the context of the Dean's Seminar ("He gave your father a very hard time." -- CJ Dyck)

When JHY was President of AMBS, I remember Dad coming home once and exclaiming "John just can't get along with people. He thinks the whole Mennonite church is apostate!"

When a committee was formed at AMBS to deal with John Howard's sexual peccadilloes, my mother was angry and outraged that Dad wasn't asked to be on it. Dad says he was at Glennon Heights at the time, and was relieved he didn't have to be on it. CJ says he was relieved that *he* didn't have to be on it.

Was *anybody* on it? I'm not particularly interested in the details, but I would like to know the date the group was formed and the outcome.

Dad also mentioned that he was instrumental in helping to get JHY the job at Notre Dame. Can anyone confirm this?

Again, I'm not writing JHY's biography, but it's impossible to tell Dad's story at the seminary without taking into account the tensions between the two men.

Ross Lynn

Bill Klassen

From:

To: ross bender <rtb@rossbender.org> ▶

Sent: Oct 09 '04 5:21pm

Subject: [rtb] rtb and jhy

William Klassen here. I have a fairly big file containing correspondence with JHY. The Yoders lived next to us on Cleveland Ave for several years.

Some time I want to work through my correspondence with JHY, and particularly during the time he was cooling his heels hoping to get a position to teach theology at Goshen. Eventually he did teach at MBS and then became President of GCBC. I consider it a major scandal that JHY was denied this small token of acceptance by his own denomination, a result of conceding to "the Pope" so much power. He did of course an end run around HSBender and became more influential in ecumenical circles than HSBender could ever have dreamed of. To recognize the strength of Yoder as a teacher one should compare sometime his syllabus in SysTTheology the year that he subbed for JCW with the one JCW gave us when we took SyTH from him in 1954--or any I suspect.

It is certainly possible that Ross Bender helped JHY get a position at Notre Dame but the seeds for that were sown long before Ross was on the scene.

Shortly after a string of assassinations in the US, Ted Hesburgh called a consultation, day long at Notre Dame to which he invited me and JHY and both of us made presentations and quite unconnected with that I was invited to teach some courses at Notre Dame in 1968-69 and a busload of ND students, mostly Moreau Seminary students, came to Elkhart bring one term to take my course on Psychiatry and Christianity. That was a great experience and I am sure that Ross approved that as well as my teaching at Notre Dame part time during the last year I was in Elkhart, 68-69. Ross probably

helped JHY get a larger position at ND but few people realize how much John was sought after when he was in Elkhart and how very deeply committed he was to teaching in a Mennonite context. Why? I hope the historians and biographers don't ignore that question. Nor should they overlook the possible connection with that and that fact that his sexual peccadilloes as you call them seem to have been confined mainly to Mennonites if not exclusively. From Notre Dame one never heard of such things. This side of the John Howard Yoder story had best not be swept under a rug, not because of voyeurism but because he was also so forthright in admonishing others when they had marriage problems.

Cordially,
Bill Klassen

From:  Swartley, Willard

To: Ross Bender

Sent: Oct 15 '04 1:35pm

Subject: RE: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

Marlin chaired the Committee. Millard Lind and Marcus Smucker were on, I believe, and one woman, but I don't remember who.

Willard

Willard M. Swartley
Professor of New Testament
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary
3003 Benham Ave.
Elkhart, IN 46517

From: Ross Bender

To: rtb@rossbender.org ▸

Sent: Oct 15 '04 8:33pm

Subject: RE: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

Thanks Willard. Millard, could you give us any further info, like dates, process, recommendations etc? Can anyone remember who the mystery woman on the committee was? My understanding is that the process resulted in John Howard's being barred from campus.

My hope is that minutes of this committee have been preserved in the AMBS archives, but I'm not counting on it.

Ross Lynn

From: Millard Lind

To: Ross Bender

Sent: Oct 20 '04 7:56am

Subject: Re: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

Yes, Willard, Marcus and I were on the committee. The woman was Evelyn Shellenberger; at that time she was chairwoman of the GBS board. I'm not sure about the beginning date of the committee. Our first assignment was to determine the extent of John's problems and to help him overcome them; in other words, redemption. Because of developments, we later became a disciplining committee which in the end resulted in a recommendation to the GBS administration that the matter be referred to the joint board for appropriate action.

I can appreciate Ross's problem of relationships with John; but to keep this in perspective, many people were aware of John's weakness in this regard, and this was especially evident in relationships with administrators. I read fairly recently a statement by a prominent American theologian thanking the Mennonite Church that it was willing to use him. I join in this statement by thanking Ross that, following the tradition of other Mennonite administrators, he was willing to lead the seminar with John as a member.

Sincerely, Millard.

From: John Bender

To: rtb@rossbender.org ▶

Sent: Oct 18 '04 5:31pm

Subject: [rtb] JHY

I appreciate the multiple perspectives shared surrounding John Howard Yoder and AMBS. While my comment does not directly relate to RTB/JHY matters, it does help, I believe, in giving a glimpse of the resolution of the disciplinary action. What happened at the congregational level is a story in its own right and the partial piece I have to add concerns the outcome of the disciplinary process.

I became a member of the elders at PSMC in the latter stages of this process. John and Annie were attending a Lutheran church close to their home. Allegations of impropriety had been made but no charges had been brought. The interim pastor and elders met with John and Annie several times and over dinner at one of the elder's homes we experienced the Spirit's leading in John making a statement of remorse/confession for actions that harmed others. I was secretary of elders at the time and don't have John's direct words but clearly remember the moment as a breakthrough in a faith-filled and faithful resolution that not only restored full relationship with the congregation and church but it was in this congregation that the family had the visitation at John's death.

John Bender
Public Relations Manager
Greencroft Retirement Communities

From: Waltersawatsky

To: rtb@rossbender.org ▸

Sent: Oct 18 '04 4:13pm

Subject: Re: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

10/18/2004

To Ross Lyn

FROM: Walter Sawatsky

I am enjoying the many little items of recall that are accumulating, many of which were not a major item when we were setting up the major themes for the oral interviews of retired AMBS faculty members, something that started after John H. Yoder died.

On your project, I am not certain to what extent you intend to concern yourself with the Yoder discipline process. There are several points of distinction to keep in mind:

1. During the Dean's Seminar, so I learned from several retired faculty, the level of faculty tension was that high that professional conflict resolution options were explored. (I would add that this also happened during an AMBS curriculum review (1992-94) when none of the previous players, including Yoder, were participants - so that must be seen as inherent in curricular turf issues, not primarily in personalities.)
2. There was a disciplinary process within MBM that in early 1983 resulted in a request to other leaders (I, for example was then MCC Europe Secretary and received the request) not to foster the inviting of John to various events, because he was using the fact of his popularity to stymie what his colleagues saw as an effort to get him to practice the radical subordination he had been preaching.
3. At the same time within GBS the disciplinary process was being blocked by John's threats if it

became public (so Marlin Miller remarked to me) hence the decision to work out an arrangement to part ways. This silencing of the seminary was quite burdensome to many of us, I recall raising the question when this would be lifted, and it was Wilbert Shenk (about 1991) who told me in private that recent "incidents" of complaint by women were the reason we could not resume working with him.

4. The public disciplining that made the press started when at Bethel College in KS there was a protest against having JHY keynote a conference. The church disciplinary process then began as something within Prairie Street church, then transferred to IM Conference where a special committee was named which included the late Atlee Beachy, who found it a most difficult process of conversation.

5. Mennonite Historical Society in 1991 discussed the implications of the suspension of Yoder's ministerial credentials, since he had been ordained as teacher of the church - i.e. publication through MQR and general activism through MHS committees was a key expression of that. I became president of MHS just as the society was ready to present a proposal to its board about suspending John's role in MHS committees, so sending John a letter indicating what MHS was proposing to do was one of my first official acts. John responded in a letter in which he resigned from all MHS-MQR positions, then turned personal in the letter and asked how I could condone such actions, etc.

6. In 1996 after the IM committee had reached a compromise agreement with John - no credentialing but urging the church program people to draw on John's gifts again - the AMBS faculty discussed it (I was away on sabbatical at the time) and the following year had John teach part of a course for Ted Koontz, when the latter was ill. MHS responded by approving the publication of the JHY bibliography in MQR and as separate offprint as an MHS publication (this was a Mark Thiessen Nation project, who, I don't think, knew much about what had been going on.).

Walter Sawatsky

From: Johns, Loren

Sent: Oct 18 '04 4:49pm

To: Sawatsky, Walter
rtb@rossbender.org

Subject: RE: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

One small correction here, Walter. Somewhere around 1985 or 1986 Herald Press received a request from someone (I don't remember whom, but it must have been some leader in the church, given the seriousness with which we took it), asking that Herald Press no longer publish John's writings, due to his sexual infractions--whatever they were. (We never knew what John was charged with, apart from a general reference to some sexual impropriety.) The Book Approving Group (of which I was a member) and the president of MPH (Ben Cutrell, at the time) met and decided that we should not make that move without a clear signal from his local congregation.

I was asked to contact Charlie Cooper, then pastor at Prairie Street, to ask about John's status at Prairie Street, including the status of any disciplinary action. Charlie reported that he had heard rumors, but this formal request from the publishing house was just what they needed to launch their own investigation. So they did so. About one year later we received their report. Charlie reported that John was a brilliant guy who successfully used his intellectual powers to deflect any attempt at discipline and that they were not able to pin anything on him. However, he recommended that we no longer publish Yoder's writings.

The Book Approving Group then met again with the president to determine our response to this report. We did not like the request that we discontinue publishing Yoder, nor did we like the implicit request that Herald Press take the "fall," so to speak, for doing what the congregation did not have the nerve to do. In short, we concluded that if John remained in good standing with his local congregation, it would have no integrity from a Mennonite *ecclesiological* perspective for Herald Press to make the disciplinary move. So we gave Yoder a clean bill of slate, so to speak, and John was happy with this report.

I know that Marlin Miller was deeply frustrated with this decision. We talked about it briefly, although it was one conversation left uncompleted when Marlin died. From my perspective it was an obvious decision and the only decision that we could make, given our polity. Marlin confided that he deeply regretted the covenant of confidentiality into which the seminary entered with John; and that he had had a number of opportunities to regret it.

Peace,

Loren L. Johns
Academic Dean
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

From: Swartley, Willard

To: Ross Bender

Sent: Oct 29 '04 2:11pm

Subject: RE: [rtb] John Howard Yoder

Ross,

The data re. the Committee has been cleared up by Millard's response. Indeed, the Committee began earlier in the eighties, was being struck when I was dean first time (end 81), as I recall. I would say it formally began late 81 or 82.

To add to Walter's outline of events re. discipline and lifting of it, I can report that the faculty, subsequent to IN-MI action, unanimously agreed to lift the ban against John coming to and being involved at AMBS. Though the faculty asked that two or three take this news to the Yoders, for different reasons the "others" declined. As dean and then acting President, it then fell to me to take this news to John and Annie (after Christmas 96). The hour and a half spent with them was one of the most moving experiences of my life. For Annie the good news was a long overdue answer to many prayers and tears. For John it was difficult to overcome doubt that the faculty agreed to welcome him back. As one would imagine, the conversation was punctuated with deep emotion, especially from Annie, also from me, and less from John, at least not expressed. As a faculty, we talked about planning some event to celebrate the reunion, but never got it pulled off. Asking John to teach War, Peace, and Nonresistance in the fall on very short notice, since Ted couldn't, brought significant healing and closure to the past rift.

Willard

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