Book Reviews


The genesis of this book was “as an experiment in feminist thought” (ix). Born out of Harder’s personal struggle in the context of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith tradition while embracing the challenges of feminist theological writing, this volume explores the nature of biblical authority.

Both a critical and a constructive model of theology are incorporated here. Harder’s discourse embodies a constructive process consisting of moments of critical reflection followed by a creative moment. This book begins with a discussion of methodological strategies and theological focus. The methodological approach and particular choices made by Harder are placed in the context of the hermeneutical discussion on biblical authority.

Chapters two and three deal descriptively with biblical authority in the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith tradition and with feminist theological thought. John H. Yoder and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are selected as conversation partners, because both scholars come from “communities of interpretation that agree on the importance of the relationship between discipleship and the process of biblical interpretation” (8). Yoder’s writings are examined because they provide a normative language of discipleship for many Mennonites. Schüssler Fiorenza’s work is an example of contextual biblical interpretation of discipleship from a feminist hermeneutic community.

The focus shifts with chapter four, where attention is paid to Biblical authority in the language of the Gospel of Mark. Harder is committed to wrestling with the discipleship tradition in the Gospel of Mark which she identifies as creative power and subversive power. With this shift in focus, Harder attempts to reread the biblical text while rooted in her Mennonite feminist experience, thus maintaining a dynamic relationship between the biblical text and the practices of the community.

Harder presents a thorough and extensive theological and biblical analysis, exploring Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, feminist theologies, and exegesis
from the Gospel of Mark. The detail work is expansive and commendable. Arguments can be made against the conversation partners of Yoder and Schüssler Fiorenza as adequately representative. However, the beauty, art, and skill of the writing is most evident in the panoramic view that this successful experiment takes.

The strength of the book lies in the vibrant “interweaving of theological convictions and interpretative practices”(x). As the analysis moves with broad strokes to two particular communal discourses (Anabaptist-Mennonite and Christian feminist), and to two individual voices within those discourses (Yoder and Schüssler Fiorenza), the reader experiences living with the tension and embracing polarities alive within this experiment.

Harder’s use of feminist thought invites participation and ongoing development. Harder’s methodology of wrestling, creativity, critique, construction, intermingling, and connectedness addresses communities committed to discerning God’s word. The author’s theological method is not a new approach, it is grounded in feminist thought. However, it is unique that the book considers a hermeneutic of obedience and a hermeneutic of suspicion by focusing on the common theological concept of discipleship.

Harder’s personal voice permeating this book is a vulnerable act, a gift for theological and biblical writing: “Because I too am easily blind to my own use of biblical interpretation to justify my own actions, I must open myself to the critique of an enlarged hermeneutic community. At the same time, I will listen to the text as closely as I can, acknowledging both the strength and limitations of my context. Neither obedience nor suspicion alone will define my approach to the Bible”(95).

A book that seeks to illuminate a critical and creative theological and biblical hermeneutic of discipleship deserves serious attention. It may be particularly crucial for Mennonites who have emphasized communities of commitment and discernment, but who often hesitate to enter circles of dialogue with other hermeneutical communities.

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As Mennonites, we focus on the Gospels, then jump over the next fourteen hundred years to our Anabaptist roots in the early sixteenth century. Readers of Mary Malone’s study will be introduced to the fascinating period in the history of Christianity that falls outside of the scope of Mennonite history. A feminist historian from an Irish Catholic background, Malone probes the New Testament scriptures and the writings of the early Church fathers, showing how Christian theology has shaped women’s place in the church. Focusing on the realities of women’s experiences rather than on prescriptions about who women should be, she revises our understanding of the “‘good news’ for women” as it evolved during Christianity’s first millennium (19).

Malone stresses that she is not writing church history but rather a history of Christianity. She is not creating a metanarrative outlining a particular history and creed, but she is deliberate about writing to a wide audience. Nor is she attempting to write a comprehensive history of women; instead she wishes “to redirect our historical attention . . . to offer as much as possible of the truth about women in the first millennium of Christianity”(37). The analysis of gender, or “the arrangements of systems of equality and inequality within Christianity,” is thus a particular focus (41). A second feminist concern is “the recovery of voice,” as Malone attempts to put women back into history to validate the experiences of contemporary women (31).

In nine chapters, Malone deftly weaves story and analysis together. Women’s voices emerge from the shadows of history – disciples, martyrs, deaconesses, widows, abbesses, missionaries. As we might expect, Mary, the mother of Jesus, plays an important role. But so do other disciples – Mary Magdalen, Salome, Joanna, Susanna, and the nameless woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume. Early church leaders like Prisca, Juna, Chloe, Lydia, Nympha, and Phoebe are recognized in their roles as prophets, church leaders, and apostles. Why have these leaders been overlooked, Malone asks. What “unfinished agenda” still needs to be addressed?

Later chapters lift from the silences women with whom readers may be even less familiar. The martyrdom of Perpetua, from the north African city of Carthage in the third century, along with her slave-girl Felicitas, illustrates the
strength of young women who fearlessly exercised their personal power; they claimed a direct relationship with God in a patriarchal culture that gave that authority only to clergy. Later, readers are introduced to fourth-century ascetics such as Marcella and Paula, and abbesses, for instance Clothilda, Radegund, and Hilda, who developed monasteries. Finally, Pope Joan, whose two-year papacy in the mid-ninth century has long ago been relegated to myth, is highlighted in the long line of Christian women worthy to be remembered.

With the stories of these women and many others, Malone re-imagines Christian history. She deconstructs “the volumes of advice” church leaders have written to instruct women “on how to fulfill their allotted roles as repentant daughters of Eve” (28). Taking a new look at the texts, she examines issues feminist historians are raising. How has patriarchal marriage silenced women? How has the fear of women’s bodies shaped Christian thought? Who claims authority? How does language suppress women? “Who acts and speaks for God?” (101)

If one can find any fault with this book, it is that it attempts to do too much. With the many threads of history and theology Malone has woven together, a reader would expect to find areas that could use further development and analysis. For instance, recent scholarship re-interpreting the original Greek suggests that Malone’s views of Paul may be too traditional. But this is only a minor criticism.

For Mennonite readers, this volume provides a wonderful companion to Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht’s Profiles of Anabaptist Women. To use historian Gerda Lerner’s words, Malone’s study offers a further “corrective” to the “selective forgetting” that has characterized history. As humans we need our history to validate our experiences. Works like this one not only broaden our understandings of the history of Christianity, they provide a script for contemporary women to follow as they live their lives in as fully a human way as possible. This book helps to fill in the gaps and provides an important step towards “the new history of Christianity” Malone envisions.

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1 See for instance Loren Cunningham and David J. Hamilton with Janice Rogers, Why Not Ordain Women? A biblical study of women in missions, ministry and leadership (Seattle, 2000).
2 Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht, Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century


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This book addresses René Girard’s theory about violence and religion, which claims that the Judaeo-Christian tradition in general, and the NT gospels in particular, identify the way for humanity to move from violence to peace. The book’s fourteen chapters and its introduction by the editor emerge from a conference held at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in June 1994. Most of the chapters reproduce the main conference presentations; some were commissioned later or developed from conference participation, and the last chapter is a reflection by Girard himself, who was absent from the event. The editor is a highly-respected senior NT scholar, whose books (e.g., Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women, 1983) have modelled balanced, informed scholarship. Violence Renounced belongs in all seminary libraries, and on the bookshelves of those captivated by Girard’s theory.

The theory is well known. Girard has repeated it, with minor modifications, in eight books and dozens of articles and responses over the last thirty years (the groundbreaking book was Violence and the Sacred, French 1972, English 1977), and scholars have promoted and critiqued it in scores of publications and conferences. Girard argues that violence emerges from humans wanting what others want (imitation, or “mimesis”). This primal urge needs to be kept in check if societies are to survive. Long ago humans discovered that projecting responsibility for this violence onto someone else (scapegoating) relieved societal tension. Out of this realization emerged religion, with its gods and scapegoating rites keeping the cycle of violence in check but not getting rid of it. Girard goes on to argue that Jesus, for the first time in history, revealed the true root of violence (mimesis) and its result (scapegoating). By
openly showing himself to be the innocent victim Jesus pointed humanity toward a new paradigm of peace: understanding what we’ve been doing to one another for centuries, and why, should lead us to change. The solution to end human violence, Girard believes, can be found in the gospels.

What is perhaps most surprising about Girard’s theory is that it has been taken so seriously. It is a universal theory about religion developed by a literary theorist with no academic training in religion, anthropology, or history; a theory that focuses on the New Testament gospels, presented by someone with no grounding in biblical studies or theology; a theory that studies only a few elements of Western thought, yet reduces all the world’s cultures to a single origin and purpose; a theory that unabashedly argues for the supremacy of the Christian revelation; and a theory concerning the biblical view of peace that shows virtually no awareness of studies by Christians directly concerned by peace questions.

But Girard has struck a chord. Many, like James Williams, one of the contributors to this volume, openly delight in a theory that in a multicultural world forthrightly states the supremacy of the Christian revelation. Others are attracted to a larger theory of culture that concerns itself with nonviolence. Most have sought to apply and correct the theory. On the whole, scholars of religion have tended to be dismissive of the theory, Christian theologians cautious, and biblical scholars curious.

Violence Renounced presents mostly Mennonite biblical scholars thoughtfully inquiring about the relevance of Girard’s view. The tone throughout is polite, and the appreciation is usually positive (even Sandor Goodhart, a Jewish studies scholar, suggests only minor modifications to a theory that many have called supersessionist). The reader will find clear though at times repetitive summaries of Girard’s view, with efforts made to underline its importance (e.g., James G. Williams, regarding servanthood), to identify the parts of it that are consistent with theological and biblical scholarship (e.g., Ted Grimsrud on the gospel portrayals of Jesus’ death, Charles Mabee on Deuteronomy), and to suggest how it could/should be adapted (Gordon H. Matties on Joshua, Robin Collins on atonement, Rebecca Adams on peacemaking in the modern world). A particular concern is with Girard’s scapegoating of sacrifice: his Jesus “saves,” not by taking on our sins (acting as a scapegoat), but by pointing out that such a view is destructive. Several
contributors (e.g., Marlin Miller regarding atonement in general, Michael Hardin and Loren L. Johns regarding the nature of sacrifice in *Hebrews*) argue that any properly Christian view of sacrifice and atonement must take into account the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ death.

The reader will also find other sharp critiques of Girard’s work, regarding its totalistic claims (especially Paul Keim’s article on an application to the Gilgamesh story and, Jim Fodor’s on the Trinity), biblical claims (e.g., Swartley on discipleship and suffering), and theological claims (e.g., Fodor). This book explores, expands, and challenges Girard’s theory. The challenges are substantial.

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The Believers Church Bible Commentary series was instituted “for all who seek more fully to understand the original meaning of scripture and its meaning for today” (11). This commentary succeeds admirably in that purpose. Waldemar Janzen has been a teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend to many Mennonite scholars, pastors, and students of the Bible. It comes as no surprise that he has written a careful, clear, and thoughtful study.

Like other volumes in the series, this commentary is set up in a pattern of three sections. “Explanatory Notes” offers an overview of each passage, with background information, brief word studies, and general notes to aid understanding. “The Text in Biblical Context” relates the individual passage to other biblical passages and themes. “The Text in the Life of the Church” provides theological reflection relating the Exodus story to more recent events and concerns. In addition, Janzen gives a set of brief essays, dealing with topics such as “Pharaoh’s Hardness of Heart” (452-54) and “Yahweh War” (463-65), to present additional background or theological reflection on questions that arise repeatedly in a study of Exodus.

Perhaps the best word to describe this commentary is masterful. Janzen provides both detailed study of the ancient world and contemporary relevance,
both ancient history and contemporary theology, always with deep respect for
the text. Masterful, however, also describes the most problematic aspect of his
commentary. Janzen describes the movement of Israel toward a “covenant to
their legitimate Master, God” (24). The relation of Master/servant (slave?) is
also carried forward by implication to the Bible itself where, within the canonical
method, the Bible becomes our (sole?) Master in relating God to us. Janzen
has “mastered” Exodus for us, firmly guiding readers toward a particular
understanding of the text and its God. While he may argue that he has attempted
to be a faithful servant to the text and to God, his continued push toward only
one understanding of the text suggests otherwise. With all these masters before
us, our own confidence as participants in the hermeneutical community is not
enhanced. Rather, our choice appears to be submission or rebellion. In a
commentary on Exodus, this is very ironic. Further, Janzen is not willing to
analyze who benefits from this particular style of mastery. There is little
engagement with voices that are excluded or marginalized by it.

Let me give an example. In numerous places Exodus says the land
toward which Israel is moving is already populated, by the Canaanites, Hittites,
Amorites, et al., and God deems these people expendable in the desire to find
that land (3:8, 17; 13:5, 11; 23, 28; 33:2; 34:11). But Janzen spends little time
wondering about this genocidal god, or asking what it would be like to read
these passages as a modern Palestinian. He does raise issues of genocide in
relation to the Egyptian oppression of Israel, stating that “the biblical text . . .
should evoke in us an abhorrence . . . of any hostility toward a person or
people based on race, nationality, religion or other group membership” (43),
but apparently this does not apply to those whom God deems expendable.
Even the essay entitled “Promised Land” (455-57) does not wonder about the
fate of these unchosen people. This is not surprising, as Janzen’s “canonical
method” allows only for questions that Exodus chooses to raise and excludes
questions left out of the biblical worldview. (For a study of the canonical
method, see Mark G. Brett, Biblical Criticism in Crisis? [Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1991], especially 156-67.)

In the end, it is Janzen’s reliance on the canonical method that most
limits the usefulness of this commentary. Readers who are mystified by the
Old Testament and who seek assistance in finding its contemporary relevance will find much in this volume that is helpful. Readers who are ready to move beyond the safe answers of tradition will find it disappointing in that respect.

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Mary Swartley and Rhoda Keener, eds., *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite women leaders tell their stories*. Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1999.

This book is filled with engaging stories of women who have succeeded in making a difference in the Mennonite church. There are twenty-eight stories all, each one an autobiographical sketch of a woman’s call to ministry. The stories are organized into four categories: theologians, pastors, educators, and administrators. The editors give priority to telling the stories of women born before 1950. Each story is written with its own unique flavor, and there is a richness in the diversity of voices. Some women speak in a factual narrative style, others use metaphor and simile to describe their journey. I found myself moved at many points; the humility, courage, and humor of the women inspired me. Their faithfulness to God shone through their words.

Yet, in spite of all these strengths, the book left me with a feeling of dissatisfaction. I was left wondering about the painful subtext of a volume such as this, which for me reads, “She would have done a good thing, but they wouldn’t let her.” There are only glimmers of this subtext, such as when Lydia Harder writes of her mother’s courage: “I wept because of the many gifts that she had, which had not been used in the church. I wept for myself, admitting that I longed for affirmation from my faith community” (28).

This is not to say that the stories are simply cheerful accounts that skim over obstacles. On the contrary, they do tell about painful barriers. There are references to self-doubt, disapproval of parents, or lack of confidence. What the book lacks is an introduction that contextualizes the stories and points to the connections between them. Rather than an introduction, there is a section
called “Vision for this Book.” It shows how the book was compiled, but basically it adds another story.

Story is a relatively safe way to share radical change; people don’t like to argue with other people’s stories. It becomes much more controversial to compare stories and use words that help to make meaning from them. This book does not want to be controversial. I suggest, however, that there is a place in 2001 for saying the word “sexism” without feeling embarrassed or worried that someone might be offended. Should the word “patriarchy” be buried on the nineteenth page? There is a time to acknowledge that all these women were influenced by feminism (a term rarely used in this book). Mennonites may have been culturally insulated, but feminism has affected all of our lives.

Of course, this book’s primary purpose is to celebrate women’s gifts in the church. And the book does feel like a celebration. However not to explicitly address the barriers to how these gifts were received in the church implies that women who did not “succeed” in ministry like these women were either not called by God or not faithful enough.

My critique, no doubt, stems from my membership in a different generation than that of the women in *She Has Done a Good Thing*. For women who are struggling with leadership in the church today, this book would be stronger with an introduction that looks for the meaning between the stories.

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*Amish Children* collects more than 150 color photographs by American professional photographer Jerry Irwin. The photographs, printed on high-quality paper, are an act of homage to a particular “old order” people and what they can be said to “represent.” The photographs portray a world thriving beyond whatever is left of mainstream’s cultural borderlines in North America. Irwin’s camera breaches the space that separates Amish customs from “our” customs, from what the text calls the “larger world.” Except for the image of a train (146), the camera ignores that larger world, leaving even Amish visitors to Niagara Falls (97) isolated, detached, seemingly self-sufficient.

Gliding in essay form alongside the photographs is the primary written text by Phyllis Pellman Good. Good is solid and sensitive, sympathetic and savvy, as a reader of Amish culture. She weaves a body of generous affirmation and earnest, even adoring, appreciation around the world of the pictures. She offers, too, a gentle interrogation of troubles Amish children might encounter when they move through adolescence, but these troubles (she assures us) are largely contained by a God-fearing, work-oriented, nature-sensitive, and government-condoned community that offers distinctive patterns of consolation and support for its members who, at the end of the day, “will be fed bountifully!” (32). Good quotes helpfully from scholarly and community sources. For example, an Amish leader observes that “‘the lunch pail is one of the great threats to the Amish community’” (7). His words are part of the shower of insights that Good provides, in this case pointing to a destabilizing technology that gives Amish men the means to take jobs at ever greater distance from the nurture of their families and homes.

Interspersed throughout the volume are succinct statements, mainly by Amish children, taken from *Family Life* and *Blackboard Bulletin*, two productions of Pathway Publishers in Aylmer, Ontario. The statements are lyrical, fresh, wise. They playfully convey a sense of sacred piety in the lives of these people. The book has seven chapters (Belonging, “Thinking” Amish, Going to School, Learning to Work, Having Fun, “Going with the Young People,” Joining the Church), and includes a short but helpful bibliography.
It is the pictures that draw our attention first. They start with the image of a boy on the front cover, with his twisted suspender (his eyes and body language suggesting perhaps mischief, perhaps wisdom beyond years, maybe reflective detachment, or wariness, or even irony). The photographs are carefully crafted as art objects. They are also strong as documentary. Indeed, the surfaces of the Amish world invite a documentary approach. However, these pictures’ fundamental commitment to an edenic vision of people rooted in “pastoral places” (47) inevitably limits their role as documentary.

That is, the photographs not only depict a world but also construct a world and construct our response. Editing and framing, composition and color, texture and detail reach out to us, and give us a direct, warm, unequivocal message. The pictures endorse our awe as a way of seeing (and by the same token endorse a way of being seen). They reveal mainly a rural Pennsylvania where, in the magic of this universe, even automobiles do not intrude. The images (with exceptions such as those where a delightful self-consciousness hints at the act of production) draw little attention to how they have been produced, or how they have come to serve as representations of both private and public moments of a culture, the public tidily mirroring the private without hint of contradiction. It seems as though one level of private meaning can be enacted in a sustained way in the public realm. We are left to ponder whether the production process tends to be limiting or liberating.

Irwin’s superb camera seems to dream a kind of godly wholeness on earth. The ingredients of Amish culture are used to utter with clarity the rudiments of life as a journey, replete with images of endless renewal. Irwin’s camera lets the children (and any of their elders who might appear) perform a drama of cultural simplicity and social continuity, of gently spontaneous yet thoughtful oneness with the rituals of nature, with the sensuous seasons ever renewed in the rich and rolling farmlands, where space and time seem to ignore the mechanisms of modern convention and convenience. Irwin offers a kind of theater for our jaded spectatorial senses and soul, a morality play of intentional community living beyond the easy reach of the viewer, yet available to the lens of camera and photo editor. Our world of fallen hyper-knowledge stumbles on half-blindly in contrast to this imagined world of wise and benign knowing and being.
But in the knowingness in the eyes and faces and bodies of these people, there may be more. There may be an insistence on the complexity of their own world, one made all the more complex for the relationships it must negotiate with the world where cameras are plentiful. The very young seem to reveal most a sense of dis-ease about the relationship. Or is it the plain line of their clothing, so like their parents’, that triggers a sense of mature meaning and grace beyond their years? Certainly these children must function from the start with a sense of their own radical difference, their costume a part of their ongoing cultural performance, modest yet so complicated and so daringly visible.

Inevitably, the pictures invite us to recall our often asked questions about our complicity with a nineteenth-century technology that not only releases but colonizes what it reveals. We travel (as investigators, explorers, voyeurs, perhaps seekers) into the Amish world with our paradigmatic cultural tool, the camera, retrieve our images, and return safely enough to the “outside” world. Doesn’t our gloriously tempting aestheticization of ethnic culture include some kind of violation, some transgression, for us who look?

Although Good’s written text does not refer literally to the respective photographs, the implicit relationships between essay and neighboring images are strong. Further, the captions linked to the photographs bridge essay and image, and do render their relationship almost explicit. At times, it seems as though the image as aesthetic object or documentary insight is reduced, and that it serves as illustration for the essay. The image is too controlled; its voice flattened (see “farm comedy,” 110). There is, if we attend to the text in relation to the image, not quite enough room for a pleasurable, rewarding “play” in interpreting images imaginatively. The reader is guided too firmly. With the strong mediating voice of the text, the risk is that the image becomes an extension of a tourist site, a theme park, that we may or may not have wanted to visit.

About a quarter-century ago, when J. Winfield Fretz and I discussed our approach to *People Apart: Portrait of a Mennonite World in Waterloo County, Ontario* (1977), we debated the question of distance, of “play,” between producers of the book, the subject of the book, and the reader. I argued for an editorial voice that announced its alien status as stranger and outsider, its incommensurable distance from the subject; a voice that could
not really speak for the subject, so that the subject might be left to speak with multiple voices of his or her own. I can’t say whether we succeeded. But it is that distance and those voices that we risk losing in the persistently crowded editorial persuasiveness of this wonderfully wrought book, *Amish Children*.

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