Anabaptists and Existential Theology

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Since first reading Robert Friedman’s book on Anabaptist theology, I have taken his description as my own—“theology is properly ‘existential theology.’”¹ Insofar as the Mennonite or Anabaptist approach to theology is above all existential (rather than dogmatic, creedal, doctrinal, systematic, fundamental, academic, ecclesial, and other such primary descriptors), I have happily continued to consider myself “Anabaptist” despite no longer being a formal member of the Mennonite church. Of course, so described, Anabaptist theology cannot be practiced in isolation from other approaches and traditions, nor can it avoid entering into conversation with alternative theological construals of human existence—Christian and otherwise. In this essay I reflect on what it means to practice “existential theology” and, in particular, Anabaptist existential theology, and I do so in conversation with other approaches and traditions as an embodiment of what I take such practice to entail.

Perhaps it is useful to begin at the beginning: Who coined the term theology, and why? The origin of the word is neither Christian nor Jewish but Greek—the term was coined by Plato in The Republic (Book II). What types or models of speech about the god (hoi typoi peri theologias, 379a) best represent the truth about human existence and its formative experiences, its ordering, its “good”? Theology for Plato is existential theology. Not content simply to repeat uncritically the tales of the poets or conventional opinions and doctrines about human beings and the gods, he wants to know the truth: how do these tales and teachings illuminate and inform human life in the world? The model of theological education he develops in the Republic is devoted to the critical clarification of the assumptions, stories, ideas, and doctrines by which we live in order to find the true meaning of our existence.² Without such concern for truth, which is not only a cognitive matter but a moral matter of how to order desire—the quest for truth requires both a certain sort of person and a
certain kind of techné or method—we live in danger of naming reality falsely, bound by fetters of our own making in the artificial light of conventional caves presided over by unenlightened, power-hungry image makers (and their media). For Plato this is a spiritual matter, for the truth of human existence seeks contact with the eternal good beyond all images and external appearances, the true invisible measure of all visible reality.³

Hence the central importance of theology. Misconceptions about the god are not ordinary falsehoods. They represent the “true lie” (to hos alethos pseudos, 382a, cf. 535d-e), the lie in the soul about “the highest things” (kyriotata) to “what is highest” in oneself. The lie of disordered theology is therefore not merely the possession of distorted knowledge; it is a wrong relation to God—a spiritual problem affecting the whole of existence: personal, social, and cosmic. I believe this is no less true for Christians and for Mennonites than it was for the ancient Greeks, and there is good reason for us to have adopted Plato’s word in developing our own accounts of the meaning of existence before God. Doctrine is tied to the drama of life, and this drama is not just a personal or communal story or tradition; it is a cosmic drama. Yet our only way toward understanding ourselves within it is the low road of particularity, exploring the narratives, symbols, and doctrines that shape us in order to recover the dramatic spiritual motion they represent.⁴ In order to do that properly, we must seek the truth about the spiritual order of reality and our place within it.

Here it is wise to attend to the existential theology of Augustine, who shared the Platonists’ concern for the truth and who, like Plato, understood the journey towards it to be a spiritual one toward God as our “homeland,” travelled along the “road of the affections.”⁵ The desire of human existence is to find the true fulfilment of its earthly loves, and this entails the purification of the eye of the heart or the soul so as to see and be guided by the truth, goodness, and beauty that ultimately moves us within the embodied particularity of our worldly experience. For Augustine, however, this path takes a form unexpected by the Platonists—not philosophical dialectic, but tears of confession as we turn to follow the “form of the servant,” the path of humble love (which cures our blinding pride) taken by God in the world.⁶ We learn what it means to partake of the divine nature when we follow that path, the via caritatis, and imitate its spiritual motion; for it is the divine Truth itself
(ipsa Veritas), “that Word through whom all things were made,” that was made flesh so that God may dwell with us.7 “Although He is our native country, He made Himself also the Way to that country.”8 It is the bodily particularity, of course, that scandalizes the Greeks, and yet it is crucial to the Christian model of God to recognize the personal intimacy of God’s spiritual relation to creation.

In the remainder of this essay I reflect on some representative stories that have helped me re-think in a broader existential context the particularity of the Mennonite, Christian memory in which I dwell, one that is also shaped by other particular memories and motions. Two of the most fateful of these cultural signs in our own context are: (1) the Canadian and North American story or “primal” (as George Grant puts it9) of the expanding domination of technological consumer culture, which has led to a growing cultural homogeneity in the service of the liberating promise of technology10; (2) the parallel story of religio-cultural diversity in a secular democratic society in which people from many traditions, backgrounds, and identities have had to wrestle with what it means to get along and relate to one another across different particularities. These two dramas stand in difficult tension with each other, and the temptation has been to flee or subvert the substantive challenge of the second by appealing to the hollowed-out, externalized, and increasingly generic identities (without meaningful memory) offered by the first, by a commodified consumer vision of “the good life.”

In the face of this dangerous, soul-destroying idolatry the irony is that, more than ever, we need the rich particular resources of lived religious traditions and their spiritual disciplines (principles of motion) in order to develop viable alternative forms of human existence. Mennonites, like the other existential traditions represented in the examples below, face the challenge of how to wrestle with this tension in seeking to serve the larger good of our culture. Our form of service seeks to embody the pattern imaged by Christ, taking the low road of kenotic particularity, the humble path of suffering love—recognizing this to be the worldly form of cosmic glory.

My representative stories are novels that I teach in a secular urban university. They have prompted me to reflect anew upon existential theology, the relationship of the spiritual motion given in Christ as exemplified in my Mennonite Christian memory to the time and place in which I live. I offer
these reflections not as an expert Mennonite theologian nor from an academic or ecclesial ivory tower, but rather as someone struggling to give an account of what it means to be answerable for what I have been given to be and to do. These stories have enabled me to chart my own personal, but I trust not idiosyncratic, journey from rural Mennonite village to the city, concluding with the challenge of what it might mean to cultivate the spiritual disciplines of the penitential community of reconciling divine love in our own modern culture.

I

The first story is *Remembering*, a novel by a Kentuckian farmer Wendell Berry. This story is close to home for North American Mennonites who began their sojourn here in rural farming communities, a form of life whose passing Berry laments, a time and place from which many of us are not far removed in memory. Andy Catlett has devoted his life to such a rural community composed of small-scale family farms, but in the loss of his right hand to a corn-picking machine he finds he has “lost his hold” on his motivating vision.

The novel begins in a state of profound disorientation and disembodiment that represents Andy’s spiritual condition, as he awakes from a disturbing technological nightmare in the strange San Francisco hotel room to which he has fled. He will find no liberation from his past problems by reshaping his identity through the commodified procurements of urban anonymity. Only by remembering who he is, the defining moments of the life history of his soul, the tangled pattern of embodied memories—words, gestures, voices—will he recover his purpose, the true direction of his bodily and spiritual desire. Andy’s movement of repentance and return is captured in evocative prose:

He is held, though he does not hold. He is caught up again in the old pattern of entrances: of minds into minds, minds into place, places into minds. The pattern limits and complicates him, singling him out in his own flesh. Out of the multitude of possible lives that have surrounded and beckoned to him like a crowd around a star, he returns now to himself, a mere meteorite, scorched, small,
and fallen. . . . He will be partial, and he will die; he will live out the truth of that. Though he does not hold, he is held. (57-8)

In this complex particular pattern he meets his own life in freedom, significant within the embodied terms in which it is given and remembered, claimed by love experienced in body and soul in a manner connecting him to the cosmic drama itself:

That he is who he is and no one else is the result of a long choosing, chosen and chosen again. He thinks of the long dance of men and women behind him, . . . who, choosing one another, chose him. He thinks of the choices, too, by which he chose himself as he now is. . . . Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it, which he did once, and now has done again. (60)

What Andy Catlett recovers is the memory of why he chose to resist the siren voices of technological and economic “progress” in order to cultivate another way of life on the land. This other way has been given him as a choice by his parents and the people of his community, who have fostered it through the disciplines of love. It is a radically traditional vision of rural existence in which fidelity to marriage, family, farmland, community, and God are richly woven together in a demanding pattern of skill and trust that our dominant urban, technological culture views with either sentimentality or disdain. When Andy, as a young aspiring “professional” agriculturalist—the newly minted product of an agricultural college seeking to make a career in farming journalism, thereby trading on his rural experience to advance his way of life—dares to voice his preference for the Amish farm he visits over the technological farming of large-scale agribusiness, he realizes this is more than an argument about agricultural methods and techniques. It is a cultural battle, a spiritual struggle over the meaning of the “highest things,” a good life and a bad one. Agribusiness, says Andy at an academic conference on “The Future of the American Food System,” is an abstract “agriculture of the mind” (23) that cannot think humanly and spiritually about what it does, and therefore lacks good judgment. It produces death, not life.

This story holds relevance for existential Anabaptist identity and theology. I find it ironic that just when Mennonite “theology” as a formal
academic discipline is growing—we are rapidly becoming more sophisticated in our understanding of methodology, systematics, and intellectual trends, and we measure our success partly by the number of prestigious professional theologians we can boast—there is less and less of significance distinguishing our way of life from the cultural mainstream. Is our newfound “Anabaptist theology” another abstract “theology of the mind” where no real people and communities dwell, rather than an existential theology cultivating a whole way of life in communion that keeps faith with one another, the land, and God—embracing and embodying, in disciplined skills of love and care, a life-giving vision of peaceable justice? In our rush to join a “progressive” mainstream culture, eager to cash in our hard-earned countercultural identities for careerist success, have we become willing to lose our embodied Mennonite soul?

This is not to say that moving from the village to the city necessarily entails such a loss of soul, but neither is it true that to be die Stillen im Lande is somehow an abdication of human cultural, social, and spiritual responsibility. It may be, as Wendell Berry believes, that such a way of life preserves a crucial set of cultural, familial, social, and spiritual disciplines rooted in a vision of existence that our culture powerfully needs to bring it back from a headlong rush toward spiritual (and ecological, civil, economic) death. At the very least this should mean that in our eagerness to dialogue with modern and postmodern theorists and writers, Anabaptist theology dare not cut off dialogue with our past and with those “backward” and “conservative” traditional communities (the Amish, for example) who continue to give visible, embodied cultural testimony to a radically different way of life that judges our own simply by being what it is. I suggest that, because of what we count as worthy models of theology, such a dialogue has become far more challenging and difficult than the conventional forms of academic and avant-garde theological reflection we cite in our footnotes.13

II

I turn now to a very different novel, representing a very different context of dialogue, urban, in some ways more recognizably theological—but perhaps only in a shock of recognition. Chaim Potok’s My Name is Asher Lev is set in
the heart of New York, where a young orthodox painter seeks to find the artistic forms by which to communicate the painful tensions of his experience as Hasidic Jew and painter, both to his own community and the wider culture. Thus it too deals with what Annie Dillard calls the “scandal of particularity.”14 As the painter of the “Brooklyn Crucifixion,” Asher Lev appropriates the central Christian symbol to express his personal pain and his vision of atonement, and creates scandalous offense on every side. The painting depicts his mother crucified between his father and himself, representing the riveting and poignant familial tension in the novel—an image inviting Freudian interpretations.

Yet the painting is not only a depiction of the painful, indeed violent, conflict of desire. To understand Asher’s scandalous art we must go well beyond Freudian psychoanalysis, which reduces religious symbolism to the objectified drama of human feeling. For Asher’s feelings (and the feelings he represents in the painting) are themselves organized in relation to religiously (not just aesthetically or culturally) interpreted existence. It is the mother who is crucified, after all, and not simply in the ritual slaughter of a victim in order to achieve the object of desire. The mother’s sacrifice is a voluntary self-giving, an “awesome act of will” as Asher comes to see, in the service of a larger, nurturing reconciliation between father and son, and the very different and yet related objects of their love, “ways of giving meaning to the world.”15 Her anguish, embodied in her own personal suffering, also represents and participates in the anguish of the universe and cries out for a form “of ultimate anguish and torment” (313). For this reason the observant Jew Asher Lev, who loves his parents, his Hasidic tradition and community, paints a crucifixion because “I would not be the whore to my own existence” (312).

This forceful language invites us to see how well Asher Lev understands the existential meaning of the Christian symbol he must employ—necessarily, he feels, in full shuddering recognition of the painful scandal it will create. The mother is crucified “between” the way of the father (strict, literal Torah observance—and therefore wary of the visual arts as potentially idolatrous—as the embodied path of atonement in the world) and the way of the son (the path of a gift divinely given that represents the world in a new form, one influenced by the Christian goyim, the tradition of Christian art). The borrowed form—the crucifix—and its content is itself profoundly Jewish, even while breaking
scandalously with traditional Jewish forms. In Asher’s hands it also breaks with the traditional Christian forms which have themselves been used—idolatrously—to oppress Jews. Asher’s “Brooklyn crucifixion” is a scandal to both Jews and Christians. The larger question it raises is, what shall we do with these differing paths, images, embodiments of redemption? How shall we find “at-one-ment” in a suffering world in which fathers and sons and their warring ways destroy one another (313)?

The implied answer of Potok’s novel is: not by denying the particularity and embodiment of one’s existence (family, ancestral past, religious traditions), nor by denying what is truly and revealingly—indeed, redemptively—embodied in the “other.” One might find in embodied forms not available in one’s own tradition what is needed to express “at-one-ment” in the tangled particularity of created existence. Such a path of dialogue will always risk scandal in order to participate responsibly in the redemptive task of bringing “the Master of the Universe into the world.” Such an existential theology as a way of life will not be afraid to break those idols (reified symbols, traditions, doctrines that have become detached from lived meaning in relation to the living God) that enclose, entomb, encapsulate the light of God’s holy presence in the world. It will therefore seek the very heart of God’s purpose for the world, rather than narrowly and self-righteously defend its own partial truth as the only path (which is to lust after false, more immediate gods). But it will not break and destroy particularity in a gratuitous manner; it will seek to be faithful to the larger truth that has inspired the particular and that nurtures it through self-giving service.

Existential theology keeps faith with the particular gift of one’s own life given by the God whose life and purpose transcends (and therefore breaks) all static images. As images, Torah and cross remain true only as embodied in lives that point in freedom toward the true inner-outer, dynamic meaning of those embodiments and their challenging, illuminating, and saving power. This power is tied to its particularity, and it can only be kept alive by cultivating its meaning in the disciplined lives of committed community members—prayer, the shared reading and study of scripture, worship. Above all it is important, as the wise old Rebbe says, “to open our eyes wide” (271) to see what new thing God is revealing and doing in the world.

Few urban Mennonites have taken the Hasidic path of visible communal
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separation from the wider culture. Indeed, urban Mennonites have become quickly acculturated and are, for the most part, virtually indistinguishable from other traditions by way of life and community discipline. Given the virtual absence of liturgical form in Mennonite worship, and the ready willingness to jettison those forms that may offend sophisticated urban tastes (e.g., community fasting, kneeling for prayer, community confession and discipline, and the ordinance of footwashing—all practiced in my own urban Mennonite church for less than a generation), little remains to distinguish the urban path of particular Mennonite witness from others in the low Protestant mainstream.

Indeed, the spectrum of doctrinal options now characterizing debates about Mennonite identity—are we a “peace church,” an adult believers’ baptism church, an evangelical or liberal church, a “voluntarist” tradition, “synergist” rather than predestinarian, etc.—can readily be found in other Protestant denominations. This does not mean the spectrum or the debates are meaningless or unimportant, or that the above-mentioned practices are unproblematic. However, it does obscure certain scandalous oddities of traditional Anabaptist existential theology, oddities which might offer creative resources for cultivating needed forms of particular Christian witness in our wider culture.

III

The third and most explicitly Christian of the novels that I am bringing into dialogue here is a work that resonates richly with many theological aspects of the Anabaptist tradition (and not just those of the Russian Mennonites!), Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov. Its hero is Alexei (Alyosha) Karamazov, “a strange man, even an odd one” whose significance is related to his particularity precisely insofar as he “bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have all for some reason been torn away from it for a time by some kind of flooding wind.” Alyosha’s strange path, as “an early lover of mankind” (18), is shaped by Christian monasticism and the commission given him by his unconventional spiritual father, elder Zosima, to “sojourn in the world like a monk” (285). Dostoevsky’s hero comes to embody a form of Christian ascetic theology in imitation of the image of the suffering Christ, a form of life with many parallels to Anabaptist
existential theology understood as “ascetic theology.” Kenneth Davis has compellingly argued that three influential characterizations of Anabaptist theology–Stauffer’s “theology of martyrdom,” Bender’s “theology of discipleship,” and Friedman’s “doctrine of two worlds”–can be interpreted as complementary facets of an ascetic theology of holiness, tied to certain medieval and monastic movements of reform. This points to a promising prophetic direction for existential Anabaptist theology, a direction I will explore below.

In Book Six of *The Brothers Karamazov*, entitled “The Russian Monk,” Dostoevsky develops, in the voice of Alyosha, his poetic prophetic answer to Ivan Karamazov’s powerfully articulate rejection of the meaning of God’s creation as expressed by Christ. Dostoevsky wrote these pages in fear and trembling, concerned that in this “culminating point,” for whose sake “the whole novel is being written,” he would be able to communicate in persuasive artistic form the practical realism of “pure” Christian existence. Not surprisingly, however, it is Ivan’s legend of the Grand Inquisitor, not Alyosha’s life of the elder Zosima, that has become the most famous of Dostoevsky’s prophetic texts in the twentieth century. As Dostoevsky feared, the odd path of Christian asceticism–even in the form of “sojourn in the world”–would not capture the imagination and commitment of Russian culture. This too is foretold in the narrator’s preface to the novel: modern critical realists will judge the hero to be “unrealistic,” the representative of an isolated, otherworldly path that cannot be recommended as a model for our time. Yet the narrator insists that Alyosha was “even more of a realist than the rest of us” (25) and surely less isolated in the sense expressed by the words of Jesus that stand as the epigraph to the entire novel: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24).

How does the ascetic path lead us out of the darkness of falsehood and isolation to the light of truth, thus uniting us through death with “the heart of the whole”? For Dostoevsky this can only be understood in relation to Johannine cosmology, God’s higher, “spiritual” truth that is nevertheless embodied in the world as the pattern of self-giving, suffering love. Unlike his compatriot Tolstoy, who translated the Gospel into a liberal pacifist moral vision, Dostoevsky sees the Christ of the Gospels is a cosmic apocalyptic
figure who tears open the hidden meaning of everyday life, and exposes it as spiritual crisis (\textit{krisis}, in the literal sense of judgement or decision—in a metaphysical and theological, not just a socio-political or moral, manner). Entailed here is a radical reversal of meaning, cultivated in the ascetic spiritual disciplines, of conventional measures of meaning, truth, and lie. To those captured by a slavishly materialist vision of human freedom and fulfilment, the “tyranny of things and habits” which truly isolates selves (as “rights-bearers”) and kills community, the monastic way may seem isolating and constricted. The elder Zosima begs to differ:

Obedience, fasting, and prayer are laughed at, yet they alone constitute the way to real and true freedom: I cut away my superfluous and unnecessary needs, through obedience I humble and chasten my vain and proud will, and thereby, with God’s help, attain freedom of spirit and, with that, spiritual rejoicing! Which of the two is more capable of upholding and serving a great idea—the isolated rich man or one who is liberated from the tyranny of things and habits? (314)

Only one freed from the isolation of self-love can truly love others, and such freedom is made possible through spiritual rebirth in the image of Christ—that is, conformity to the “form of the servant” that builds up human community through deeds of humble love.

Thus in answer to the question raised earlier, it is not \textit{ascesis} per se that “saves”—after all, \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} also gives us the cramped, judgmental asceticism of \textit{ressentiment} in the character of Father Ferapont, who is captured by a crudely materialist religious cosmology (and the Grand Inquisitor too is a rigorous ascetic). Rather it is ascesis in the service of the truth of Christ that saves, a sincere inner penitence where one becomes “also guilty before all people, on behalf of all and for all, for all human sins, the world’s and each person’s, only then will the goal of our unity be achieved. . . . This knowledge is the crown of the monk’s path, and of every man’s path on earth” (164). Only such a conscious solidarity with the world’s sin and guilt can move human hearts to participate in the divine love that seeks to reconcile the world in a peaceable harmony. Such an asceticism seeks not “otherworldly” purity nor, as the elder reiterates, is it afraid of human sin; it rather “keeps
close company” with the heart where the image of Christ presides, taking the penitential path of continual confession and suffering servanthood in which the re-creative mystery of divine love is powerfully enacted. “And what is the word of Christ without an example?” asks the elder. Alyosha’s biography proceeds to recollect examples of the penitential life taken from the elder’s memory. They follow a common pattern: an existential revelation of the “whole truth” of life, the confession of solidarity in human guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and a turn to the path of community brought about through active embodied love. To quote Father Zosima again:

. . . every action has its law. This is a matter of the soul, a psychological matter. In order to make the world over anew, people themselves must turn onto a different path psychically. Until one has indeed become the brother of all, there will be no brotherhood. No science or self-interest will ever enable people to share their property and their rights among themselves without offense. Each will always think his share too small, and they will keep murmuring . . . . (303)

Such a vision of “the truth alone,” and “not earthly truth, but a higher one” (308), dies to the pursuit of retributive justice and its alienating, isolating claims (which underlie Ivan’s and the Inquisitor’s rebellion), in order to be reborn into the suffering solidarity of human-divine community, where God’s presence is lovingly served in all its created likenesses on the earth.

Dostoevsky’s artistic portrait of ascetic theology has interesting parallels in the Anabaptist tradition, not least in the ascetic theology of Menno Simons. As in Dostoevsky’s portrait, Anabaptist asceticism seeks the restoration of true humanity in the image of Christ made possible in the “penitent existence,” as Menno calls it.23 For him, as in The Brothers Karamazov, the truth of this image and existence is discerned from within the apocalyptic framework of the “slain Lamb” who rules in the heavenly city, a rule mediated on earth in the suffering servant church. To awaken and to remain attentive to this truth requires rebirth and the existential practice of the disciplines of the penitential life—for it is a truth that is transparent neither in the fallen human soul nor in fallen human society. “All who are born of the truth hate the lie,” says Menno, echoing John (and Plato): “Conversely, all who are born of falsehood hate the truth” (330). This cosmic struggle between divine truth and its false, parodic
copies defines the terms of human existence; to serve the truth is an *agon* for which only the re-born are equipped.²⁴

Yet this rebirth and awakening is neither simply an inner matter of the heart, nor an individualistic experience. It is a being reborn into the true nature of divine love that becomes visible in the world through embodied expression, the *mimesis* of the spiritual motion of humble love incarnated by Christ. If the pattern is true, then its nature cannot be an abstract or formal or “otherworldly” ideal; it must hold in all aspects of existence. “If you are born of the pure seed of the holy Word, the nature of the seed must be in you” (394),²⁵ and all things will proceed according to that nature, as Menno’s extensive discussion of examples of the penitent life in “True Christian Faith” makes clear. Such love, in the language of *The Brothers Karamazov*, is not a “miracle impossible on the earth,” a kind of otherworldly dream “staged” by the Gospel stories and the Christian church for dramatic inspiring effect (237, 58). It is a demanding way of life, yet precisely one for which human beings have been made. That is the premise of existential Anabaptist theology—the Gospel is not an unattainable ideal of love presided over by the church as the custodian of proper doctrine and otherworldly hope, while the realities of worldly justice and social order are addressed by other more attainable means.²⁶

Hence the sacraments and the body of Christ must be interpreted in a fully existential manner as well, as the real presence and embodiment of the penitential pattern.²⁷ The weeping of true repentance, says Menno, is not empty or formal display—it is the expression of a new mind, a new nature, which will become manifest in deeds.²⁸ Baptism represents the “true new birth with its fruits” of obedience to the inner Word; the Lord’s Supper conforms the outer sign to its true meaning, the body of Christ in which those who partake become “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone” and incarnate Christ’s kenotic pattern of humble love in all of life.²⁹ At the motivating heart of this participatory ascesis is neither dazzling miracle nor forensic status—it is the transformation of holy erotic divine love. The culminating image here is the celebratory assembly of the marriage feast of the Lamb.³⁰ So too in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Alyosha’s re-birth is sacramentally and iconically depicted in another of Dostoevsky’s “culminating” moments—a chapter entitled “Cana of Galilee,” in which Alyosha is granted a vision of the heavenly wedding feast that ties together earthly joy and its heavenly completion. It is this unity
of inner and outer, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly, personal and cosmic, that equips him for ascetic sojourn in the world, his ministry of reconciliation that helps transform the community of children from a pattern of strict, retributive justice to that of humble, restorative love.

IV

This brings me to my concluding point, and the one with which I began. Existential Anabaptist theology of the sort described above must be particular but it cannot be isolated. Just as Christ incarnated the creative power of divine love in the particular form of a humble servant, thus reversing expectations for how to understand the cosmic authority of divine rule and its worldly embodiment, so also the community of Christ’s followers seeks to embody this pattern in our own time and place. This astonishing image is dramatically unveiled in Revelation 5, in John’s vision of the sealed scroll that contains the hidden meaning and destiny of historical existence. No one is worthy to open the scroll and God will not break the seals–human destiny and with it the destiny of creation is mediated in the world by human freedom. God does not interfere magically. John begins to weep–how will God’s purposes for this alienated creation be realized? Who is worthy to be the agent of redemptive justice and reconciling harmony in the world?

The answer is given in an amazing conjunction of images. The elder says to John, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals”–an image of the Messianic warrior king. What John sees, however, is “a Lamb, standing, as though it had been slain”–the Messianic conquering of evil is accomplished by death. The Messianic agency that draws all creation to its fulfilling completion is the power of suffering, serving love that exhausts the strength of evil by patient martyrdom. This calls for an alternative vision of the meaning and end of human existence (represented by a “new song” in Rev. 5: 9-14) founded on the model of worthiness of the slain Lamb.

And yet this ascetic vision of humble, serving love has as its final aim the inclusion of all reality in the joyful feast of the remembering people of God, the descent out of heaven of the holy Jerusalem lit up by the Lamb in whose light walk all the nations, each bringing their own particular gift of
glory to it (Rev. 21:22). It is no accident that Dostoevsky places this vision of the eschatological banquet in the New Jerusalem at the culminating points of existential “re-birth” in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Alyosha is directed by his dead elder to the focus of true worship, “our Sun,” with the words “We are rejoicing . . . we are drinking new wine, the wine of a new and great joy. See how many guests there are? Here are the bridegroom and the bride . . . .”31 Mitya, having undergone the three spiritual torments by which he is brought to penitent confession (though not of the kind sought by his prosecutors), has a dream of “the wee one,” an image in response to earthly suffering that enables him to love existence “as it is” and initiates a humble, loving (rather than retributive, accusatory) quest for understanding its meaning. It is an image related to John’s vision in Rev. 21:3-4, in which suffering, tears, pain, and death are overcome as God comes to dwell with human beings. Mitya is increasingly sustained by the “new man” that has arisen in his soul,32 who, in contrast to the tempting image of the “new man” of technological liberal progress, is capable of the suffering, reconciling love of God’s dwelling because nurtured by God’s gift of joy, “without which it’s not possible for man to live” (592).

This is the hymn-singing “underground man” born anew, who knows the transcendent sun of the New Jerusalem—even “if I don’t see the sun, still I know it is. And the whole of life is there—in knowing that the sun is” (592).33 So also the very end of the novel where Alyosha speaks to the boys at the “big stone” on the occasion of Ilyusha’s funeral, about the truth of existence as revealed by the resurrected slain Lamb, that joins in a life-giving union what seems so opposed: unjust suffering and the joy of life, pain and yet praise of creation as it is. As the precocious Kolya puts it: “It’s all so strange, Karamazov, such grief, and then pancakes [bliny] all of a sudden—how unnatural it all is in our religion!” (773)

Such penitential asceticism, and then *Tweeback* all of a sudden! That the tears of penitence and overwhelming joy mingle together to water the soil of our hearts and enable the seeds of our higher homeland to grow, is something I learned as a child in a Mennonite household and church community. Here we are brought to the center of existential Anabaptist theology, in a conjunction of body and soul, penitence and joy, death and resurrection movingly depicted
also in a well-known passage by Menno:

Just as natural bread is made of many grains, pulverized by the mill, kneaded with water, and baked by the heat of the fire, so is the church of Christ made up of true believers, broken in their hearts with the mill of the divine Word, baptized with the water of the Holy Ghost, and with the fire of pure, unfeigned love made into one body. (145)

It is not accidental, I believe, that the Johannine and Pauline images of death and resurrection are agricultural—as “seed”—and not mechanical or abstract artistic or intellectual theories. The meaning of our embodied existence is of a piece with the order created by God, the dynamism of which is the continual self-giving gift of God’s creative Spirit (not dead mechanism, not human making) that enlivens the world through love. As participants in that cosmic drama we need not fear to be who we are, so long as we give ourselves to cultivating the divine seed given us in Christ that joins our particular partiality to the suffering, celebratory completion of the “all in all.”

Notes

3 I trust it will be evident, therefore, why and where I disagree with postmodern Mennonite voices calling for poetry to replace philosophy and theology. While I welcome Scott Holland’s affirmation of “theopoetics,” I cannot agree with his unerotic reading of Plato. Plato certainly did not fear poetry or the poets, just as he did not fear politics, politicians, intellectuals, and sophists. What he feared “more than anything” (in himself, in others, and in the city) was to lie “to the soul about the things that are” (Republic 382ab): the willful ignorance of truth, the manipulation of ideas, images, emotions, desires without regard for understanding their meaning and good ordering. See Scott Holland, “Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 71 (April 1997): 227-41. For my alternative reading of Plato, see “The Theological Politics of Plato and Isaiah: A Debate Revisited,” The Journal of Religion 73/1 (January 1993): 16-30. An insightful interpretation of Plato and the poets is Hans Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets,” in Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical
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Augustine refers to “intentional signs” (signa data) as “those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood.” On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson (Library of Liberal Arts, 1958), II, 3. In order to understand and interpret those signs properly one must attend to and imitate their existential meaning. Hermeneutics is not only an intellectual exercise.

Augustine says the following about the difference between his Platonism and the path of Christ: “I began to want to give myself airs as a wise person. I was full of my punishment, but I shed no tears of penitence. Worse still, I was puffed up with knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1). Where was the charity which builds on the foundation of humility which is Christ Jesus? . . . None of this is in the Platonist books. Those pages do not contain the face of this devotion, tears of confession, your sacrifice, a contrite and humble spirit . . . . It is one thing from a wooded summit to catch a glimpse of the homeland of peace and not to find the way to it . . . .” Augustine, Confessions, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), VII, xx-xxi.

Ibid., I, 11. As Augustine makes clear (I, 10-12), this divinely given spiritual motion by which God comes to dwell in God’s own creation is not some form of space and time travel–God comes to where God already is. So also the motion of our return to God is not some spatio-temporal tradition but the fulfilment of our created existence which was designed for eternal communion with God and our neighbors. The cosmic spiritual drama in which we participate has its terms (nature) given by the Creator God who does not abandon us to our distortions of that nature but seeks to cure our relation to the source and end of love. To quote Augustine: “One lives in justice and sanctity when one is an unimpaired appraiser of the intrinsic reality of things. Such a one has an ordered love, who neither loves what should not be loved, nor fails to love what is lovable” (I, 28, my translation).

I offer an interpretation of this story as one of “spiritual crisis” in Christian Ethics and


12 Cultural in the twofold meaning of cultus: 1) what we worship, respect, venerate—the teachings, rituals and practices that re-mind us who we are; 2) what we cultivate as worthy of attention, labor, and care so as to serve the good of a place, a community, and a time in all aspects.

13 Two Mennonite theologians—Harry Huebner and David Schroeder—have conducted a fascinating dialogue with the Amish community, sharing their common struggles over how to cultivate the disciplines of visible Christian community in a seductive consumer culture. The dialogue has not, I take it, been conducted as “field research” for academic publication (the preservation of Mennonite “folk lore”) but with the aim of critically and constructively understanding what it might mean to be the church in late modern North America.


15 Chaim Potok, My Name is Asher Lev (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972), 309. Her act of will sharply contrasts to the aesthetic vision articulated in an art book Asher’s mother gives him to read early in his formal education, Robert Henri’s The Art Spirit, where the powerful artistic will is fostered by “freeing” oneself from all creeds and communities. Asher’s mother’s act of will is a religiously informed and inspired devotion of love toward (neither liberation from nor enslavement to) her family and her community.

16 For an interesting Jewish interpretation of Jesus’ death as another particular form of the pattern of fraternal displacement and redemptive “choseness” found in the Hebrew Bible, see Jon D. Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

17 One reason Asher’s family is so deeply offended by the crucifixion is that Asher’s grandfather (after whom he is named) was killed on his way home from synagogue one Saturday night by a drunken Christian peasant—“somehow my grandfather had forgotten it was the night before Easter” (11).

18 Hasidic cosmology says the spiritual task of Jewish life in community is to liberate the light of God’s glory (shekinah) hidden and imprisoned in the shells of hardened worldly forms. This is a messianic task in which, through human deeds of service (sparks of responsibility), the world is hallowed for God’s presence. This requires engagement with the powers of darkness; God approaches us in the alien, the partial, the incomplete, and invites us to join in the work that transforms it “into the substance of true life,” as Martin Buber puts it. See The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 78; cf. 53f.


20 The term “ascetic” has been used in many ways. Etymologically it is tied to askeo, “to work,” in the sense of giving artistic form (in the Homeric literature), and to askesis, the practice of or in something, especially a “mode of life” (in the religious and philosophical sense). See A Greek-English Lexicon, ed. Liddell & Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); and Asceticism, ed. V. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
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24 Dostoevsky depicts this insight in his portrayal of Alyosha’s conversion, following the death of his beloved elder which provokes a crisis of faith in Alyosha’s “virgin heart.” It is only when, in response to a sisterly act of love from an unexpected source (the seductive, “fallen” Grushenka), Alyosha experiences for himself the full inner-outer meaning of the elder’s teachings that he becomes equipped for the ascetic “sojourn in the world” to which he has been called. It is a penitential rebirth characterized by weeping and ecstatic, erotic confession: “It was as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all came together in his soul, and it was trembling all over, ‘touching other worlds.’ He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to ask forgiveness, oh, not for himself! but for all and for everything, ‘as others are asking for me,’ rang again in his soul. . . . He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast . . . .” (362-3)

25 Menno argues that the nature of divine love into which followers of Christ are reborn is of a piece with “natural love” of parents for children and spouses for one another, where inner intention and external deed are not falsely divided but represent an inner-outer coherence within a larger natural and social ordering of love. “True Christian Faith,” 338.

26 The active involvement of the Mennonite church in establishing the practice of “restorative justice,” for example, bears powerful continuing witness to this theological vision.

27 This existential interpretation of the sacrament of penance and confession is present also in the path of elder Zosima—for which he is criticized by opponents who claim “that here the sacrament of confession was being arbitrarily and frivolously degraded,” an ironic charge given the complete religious and moral seriousness of the elder, whose focus is on the power of the Gospel and the image of Christ to transform all of life.

28 See Egil Grislis, “Menno Simons on Sanctification,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 69.2 (April 1994): 226-46: “Menno’s understanding of sanctification was remarkable both for its realism and its high expectations . . . . [his] concern was personal but remained in a distinctively ecclesial setting. The Christian love he celebrated was no mere ideal but a participatory reality.” (246).

29 Note the elder’s words as recorded by Alyosha: “One may stand perplexed before some thought, especially seeing men’s sin, asking oneself: ‘Shall I take it by force, or by humble love?’ Always resolve to take it by humble love. If you so resolve once and for all, you will be able to overcome the whole world. A loving humility is a terrible power, the most powerful of
all, nothing compares with it. Keep company with yourself and look to yourself every day and hour, every minute, that your image be ever gracious. . . . Brothers, love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it, for it is difficult to acquire, it is dearly bought, by long work over a long time, for one ought to love not for a chance moment but for all time.” (319)


31 The Brothers Karamazov, 361. In response to Alyosha’s fear to look upon the glory of “our Sun” (a reference to Rev. 1:16: 21:23f.) the elder says, “Do not be afraid of him. Awful is his greatness before us, terrible is his loftiness, yet he is boundlessly merciful, he became like us out of love, and he is rejoicing with us, transforming water into wine, that the joy of the guests may not end. He is waiting for new guests, he is ceaselessly calling new guests, now and unto ages of ages.” (361-2)

32 Note also the role that Grushenka and her purified “worldly love” plays in the conversion of Mitya, who confesses: “Before it was just her infernal curves that fretted me, but now I’ve taken her whole soul into my soul, and through her I’ve become a man!” (594)

33 This redemptive knowledge of the loving source of human solidarity enables Mitya, finally, to speak of his hated sibling rival as “brother Ivan”; his last words in the conversation with Alyosha are “love Ivan” (597). By contrast, Ivan’s parting words to Alyosha concerning his brother Dmitri are “I hate the monster! I don’t want to save the monster, let him rot at hard labor! He’s singing a hymn!” (654) These words occur at the end of his own “three torments” in the form of visits to the illegitimate brother Smerdyakov, but Ivan’s journey represents a contrasting movement of “truth” regarding the parricide to Mitya’s path. Mitya is publicly accused of a murder he did not commit, and yet recognizes his murderous heart and takes free responsibility for it in a full, life-changing confession. Ivan, who has reserved complete freedom for hatred in his “wishes,” is confronted by Smerdyakov with his actual complicity in the parricide, and cannot accept responsibility. At the end of his tormenting visits he too has a dream, not of a “wee one” or an eschatological wedding feast, but a “nightmare” of “the devil” who reminds him of yet another of his poetic creations, “The Geological Cataclysm,” which elaborates the existential consequences of modern scientistic cosmology—the appearance of a “new man” in whom the idea of God has been destroyed, making possible the emergence of a titanic, nature-conquering “man god.”