Communication Technology and the Development of Consciousness: Reframing the Discussion of Anabaptists and Postmodernity

Daniel Liechty

Postmodernism has been defined variously and used differently in different contexts. I begin by laying out explicitly my assumptions for this essay. After receiving graduate degrees in religion and theology, I continued professional training in clinical social work, which is an interdisciplinary profession combining the perspectives of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with the sociological perspectives of systems theory and social processes. Consequently, when I approach the question, “What is postmodernism?” I do not think of it in terms of a social, political, or philosophical movement in the abstract, nor as a disembodied aesthetic style. Rather, I think of postmodernism as a style of consciousness, a set of mental habits, a conglomerate of common sense notions about the world and how one navigates or negotiates action within that world. This style of consciousness can be compared with and contrasted to other styles of consciousness. I also look for the specific material conditions in which contrasting styles of consciousness are rooted and which bring these styles to fruition.

What follows is a brief outline of four such styles of consciousness, which I call the Ancient, Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern styles. I suggest that each of these styles corresponds to specific material conditions which I designate as “communications technology.” I then place sixteenth-century Anabaptism within this scheme of consciousness, and finally I indicate areas where the heirs of Anabaptism might contribute positively in a world characterized by the emerging postmodern style of consciousness.

Daniel Liechty is an alumnus of Eastern Mennonite College, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and the Eastern European Program of the Mennonite Central Committee. He is currently assistant professor in the School of Social Work, Illinois State University, Normal, IL.
My reflections are based mainly on three very different but important books. The first, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, was published some twenty years ago by a Princeton professor of psychology, Julian Jaynes. The second appeared a decade ago and was widely reviewed in the popular press: *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman. The third came out quite recently: *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* by anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram.

In his book, Jaynes reported on a quest for the origins of human self-consciousness, that aspect of the individual human ego which fosters self-reflection and psychological interiority. Humans have this attribute, other animals apparently do not. Therefore, it must have appeared in the course of human evolution, whether suddenly or gradually. We commonly assume it is this very aspect of our psychology that makes us ‘human,’ and that all of those ancestors we identify as human must have shared this style of consciousness. What struck Jaynes as he examined the oldest written texts of human history was that we do not find indications of this style of consciousness present in the most ancient written texts. What we find in these texts are not people who act as a result of interior reflection and internal dialogue, but people who act in simple and quite direct obedience to the commands of voices they understand to be the voices of gods. The genius of Jaynes’s work is that, rather than ignore this evidence or explain it away on the basis of modern disbelief in such gods, he took it seriously and hypothesized that ancient people did indeed hear such voices. Jaynes suggested that obedience to what is understood to be the external commands of gods is a distinctive style of consciousness made possible by a distinctive organization of information in the human brain. This he labeled the *bicameral mind*.

Drawing on a growing pool of brain function studies from a wide variety of disciplines, Jaynes began to see that what we call self-consciousness, the human sense of self or ego, is a metaphor for how our brains organize and process information. We might say it is the particular configuration of our hard drive, to use a computer analogy. Yet we know from working with brain-injured people that the human brain is able to organize information and
functioning in many different ways when influenced to do so by external circumstances. In the twenty years since Jaynes published his work, this pool of brain function studies has increased exponentially in number, scope, and exactness, now aided by new technologies such as CAT scanning and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which yield visual images of functioning brain fields. All of this new work, unavailable to Jaynes, clearly supports the hypothesis on brain development and functioning on which he based his thesis.6

All of the best clinical and experimental data, child developmental data, as well as clinically based narrative observations (as found, for example, in Oliver Sacks’s popular writings) point toward the conclusion that the human brain is very plastic in relation to its environment. Based on this conclusion, Jaynes suggested there is no concrete reason to insist that the brains of ancient humans were organized or configured in exactly the same way as our own. In other words, if we approach the known data without prejudice or bias, we must hold as at least plausible the notion that ancient people commonly had quite a different style of consciousness from our own. As Jaynes wrote:

The brain is more capable of being organized by the environment than we have hitherto supposed and therefore could have undergone such a change as from bicameral to [self] conscious man mostly on the basis of learning and culture.7 . . . The brain teems with redundant centers, each of which may exert direct influence on a final common pathway, or modulate the operation of others, or both, their arrangements able to assume many forms and degrees of coupling between constituent centers . . . . [The human brain] provides an organism where the early developmental history of the individual can make a great difference in how the brain is organized.8

Applying these ideas to human evolutionary history, the picture Jaynes presented is one of primitive hominids slowly emerging from the kind of consciousness we see commonly in dogs, cats, and higher primates through a specific communication technology, the development and use of human language. These early beings were not self-conscious, however. They communicated mainly through gestures, mimetic actions, and symtonic vocalizations. But as human language developed, it began to first incorporate
and then supplant these gestures, actions and vocalizations, eventually creating the bicameral style of consciousness. In bicameral consciousness, the thought side of the brain is not connected to the action side of the brain through the metaphorical, symbolic self, which in modern consciousness ties these two sides together. The person, identified with action, therefore perceived the promptings from the thought side of the brain (that which we moderns perceive as an internal, verbal dialogue or narrative) to be external commands from external sources. Nothing we know from brain studies would preclude this bicameral organization of consciousness, and much suggests it would be an expected intermediary stage between the type of consciousness we see in certain other animal species and our own modern style.

Because there are no written sources from before there was writing, we obviously have no direct access into human consciousness in this early stage of development. Much of Jaynes’s hypothesizing was based on educated inference and speculation, which is perhaps one reason that his book has been overlooked these past two decades. It didn’t help the clinicians do therapy and it didn’t contain charts and data for the experimentalists; therefore, it had no natural constituency or community of supporters within its discipline. As Jaynes noted, we begin to have sources rendering direct access into the consciousness of human beings only with the advent of a new communications technology, namely writing. He suggested, however, that in the most ancient of written sources, such as the oldest sections of the Bible, the Iliad and other such sources, we do catch a fleeting glimpse of this ancient style of consciousness in its very end stage, just as it was being displaced by the style of consciousness which emerges with writing.

What I am designating as the pre-modern style of consciousness, in which a rudimentary sense of self or ego begins to develop, is made possible by the development of writing. With writing, the directly communicating voices of the gods begin to disappear, a phenomenon noticed and puzzled over by many modern commentators. Like Jaynes, David Abram combed ancient literature for his clues in exploring this juncture, but he is also tuned in experientially, through shamanistic training gained during his field studies in anthropology, to the styles of conscious awareness found even today among contemporary preliterate people. Abram does not cite Jaynes’s book and is apparently working completely independently of Jaynes’s ideas. Nevertheless, though
both his terminology and his focus of attention differ considerably from those of Jaynes, there is an amazing congruence between these two writers in presenting what Abram calls the *preliterate consciousness* and what Jaynes calls the bicameral mind.

Abram suggests that the preliterate style of consciousness does not think of itself as separate from the non-human world (what he calls the *more-than-human world*). Such a person hears in the calls of birds and animals, the rushing river and in the rustling of the wind a communication just as real and intentional as is heard in human speech. This person would in fact think of human speech as being in the same category as the calls and cries of birds, animals, and the wind. Communication utilizes all senses, not only (or even always primarily) sight and sound.

The preliterate consciousness does not have a strong sense of individuality or symbolic self. When asked to reflect on his or her motives for a particular action, such a person more likely thinks of himself or herself in the third person plural than the first person singular (e.g., “sons of Motzi go here this time of year”). Like Jaynes, Abram suggests that the advent of writing eventually broke down this style of consciousness and expelled human beings from the garden of lushly sensual existence to a place where the gods (and birds, animals, trees, rivers, mountains . . . ) no longer speak.

The pre-modern style of consciousness is characterized by an emerging sense of self that comes through literacy. But this literacy and its attendant style of consciousness is available only to an elite, and is then communicated verbally to the masses of people who cannot read and do not have access to the written texts in which the voices of the gods are now found. The pre-modern consciousness is the consciousness of a society, therefore, which embraces both the tortured, introspective inner life of an Augustine of Hippo as well as the consciousness of his contemporary, illiterate serf, slave, or outcast. It is a society where the communication technology of writing is used by an elite to subjugate the illiterate masses. Typically, the masses then respond to this subjugation by periodic outbursts of charismatic, oral authority, authority that place direct access to the gods through personal inspiration above the authority of written texts. These reversals of authority are inherently unstable and short-lived, however. They either disintegrate internally or, more often, through a process the literature calls the *routinization of charisma*, are co-opted by the
literate elite. This instability is unavoidable because oral communication cannot compare to the technology of writing in the task of organizing and routinizing ruling authority for groups larger than a family or tribe. This ongoing dynamic conflict has been noticed by many historians and interpreters of the pre-modern world.

The modern style of consciousness, the consciousness of mass literacy, was made possible by the introduction of the printing press. No longer dependent on an elite to interpret sacred or secular texts of authority, for the first time on a wide social scale each person was able, and then eventually expected, to read and interpret such texts for himself or herself. The modern style of consciousness, the idea of a singular, bounded, integrated, and permanent self, is what emerges when literacy is widely present throughout society and written texts of all kinds are available to everyone.11

As mass literacy evolved, within a few generations a style of consciousness emerged that Neil Postman characterizes as the typographic mind, but which we can simply call the modern style of consciousness. This style is a direct result of the self-conscious, reflective pondering formed by reading and writing from a relatively early age. It most highly respects the well-honed, terse, and linear presentation of data leading to a well-defended conclusion, and tends to view human beings as thinking machines, separate from nature. While power of rote memory and awareness of non-visual sense data in a person exhibiting the modern style of consciousness is small compared to one exhibiting the preliterate style, we will expect the modern person to have a very developed attention span with the ability to keep focused without distraction on one subject until it is thoroughly explored. These are the very mental characteristics which come to define intelligence in a literate culture.

The effects of literacy on consciousness, on how the mind organizes and processes information, resulting in the modern style of consciousness, is well summarized by Postman:

From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one’s habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the ‘analytic management of knowledge.’ To engage the
written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. To accomplish this, one must achieve a certain sense of distance from the words themselves, which is, in fact, encouraged by the isolated and impersonal text . . . . In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content.12

As we have seen, the ancient style of consciousness emerged through the advent of language. We see it only fleetingly in the most ancient human texts, just as it was being replaced by literate-consciousness. The premodern style of consciousness emerged with the advent of writing. As literacy spread among the social elite in many societies and cultures, we begin to see it unmistakably emerging roughly around that very time Karl Jaspers designated as the axial period and extending on through to the High Middle Ages. The modern style of consciousness emerged with the printing press and characterizes consciousness roughly from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment through to the present.

I suggest that we are presently in a transitional state in which the advent of a new communications technology, namely the mass distribution of visual images dominated so far by television, but soon to include a wide spectrum of broadcast and receiving options, is facilitating the emergence of a new style of consciousness, a new mental configuration by which the human brain organizes and processes information. This is the postmodern style of consciousness. While we are only in the very beginning stages of this style’s birth process, thus precluding any exhaustive exposition of its contents, it is already recognizable enough.

What then is the postmodern style of consciousness? This is where, in all honesty, we should plead ignorance, simply because it is too early to tell. We see in the history of each style of consciousness that some generations pass before the new style fully evolves and filters into a population broad enough to
be noticed. Although the speed with which a new style completes this process is probably increasing, recall that children of the Baby Boomers are the first generation for whom high-speed visual media have been present from their earliest memory. Only very few of these children attended schools where such media, rather than books, were the primary teaching tools. The new media will very likely be the mode of education, however, for their children, our grandchildren, and subsequent generations of those now being born. Yet already we are stultified at how quickly and easily our children take to technologies which we, huddling over program manuals like sacred texts, must spend hours, days, and weeks to barely master.

High-speed visual communications technology, furthermore, is still in process. It has up to now been dominated by commercial television broadcasting, but many observers suggest that this is just a beginning point. The relatively near future will see a convergence in cyberspace of television technology with personal computing technology, allowing each user to become a selector of information and a broadcaster in his or her own right. The passive television screen is becoming interactive and may even become a mobile object, worn on a regular basis much like eyeglasses. The more we learn about the biochemical functioning of the brain, the more feasible it becomes to link brain functioning with microchip functioning, not only prosthetically (as is already being done, for example, in optic restoration) but creatively.

What sort of consciousness – what kind of brain configuration for the organization and processing of knowledge – might a person develop, who from a very young age, upon awakening, habitually puts on cyberlenses to keep connected throughout the day with an entire virtual world of interactive information and stimulation, and to project that person’s own thoughts and images into the virtual world for interaction with others? What sense of self would such a person develop? Where would s/he see the boundaries or containers of his or her mind or symbolic self? Certainly not at the skin line. Certainly not as something internal to the person’s body, contained in the head or heart or bowels. Even in these early stages we see this emerging style of consciousness assuming a logic that is non-linear; a protean sense of identity that easily moves with changes in names, life narratives and even gender depending on particular contexts; an attention mechanism able to ‘ride astride’ many different areas of stimulation at once, and an almost frightening melding
of mind with machine which, for those of us being left behind by this emerging consciousness, culminates in nightmare visions of the Borg species in the Star Trek series. Again, I insist that while we are seeing the beginnings of the rise of this new style, it is not given to our generation to know what the final result will be. Yet we would do well to keep a few things in mind.

First, I assume that readers of this article are totally immersed, intellectually, psychologically, culturally, and emotionally in the reading-formed, modern style of consciousness. Our sense of self and habits of thought were formed on the basis of books, on the basis of reading and writing. Scholars are, if anything, hyperattached to the reading-formed style of consciousness. And this is true of everyone who sets forth an interpretation of this phenomenon in a written text, no matter how often intoning the mantra ‘postmodern’ in that text. If we do not keep this in mind, we miss a very important point.

Second, not all that is anti-modern is for that reason postmodern. A good portion of what poses as postmodern on the popular and academic booksellers’ shelves seems rooted in some claim of having reconnected directly with the voices of the gods, or the dogmatic insistence that the voices of the gods are heard in a very subscribed text or group of texts (and even then, usually only as interpreted by specific people). In light of this analysis, these would indeed be considered anti-modern moves but not in a postmodern direction.

A third point is that for those of us deeply attached to the reading-formed style of consciousness, the emergence of a new style of consciousness can feel very frightening – even apocalyptic. It may seem as though civilization itself is at stake! It seems these kids have mass attention deficit disorder. Judged by the standards of acumen privileged in a reading-based style of consciousness, it seems we are producing a generation of regressive intelligence. We dread the estrangement this development potentially creates between us and our children. It means we are a generation who truly live in a different world, a completely different style of consciousness, from that of our children and grandchildren. When I see the faces of parents watching their small children take to the computer like ducks to water, I think of how a sixteenth-century European peasant must have felt – that mixture of joyful pride and dread of loss – watching his or her child heading off to the monastery school or to university.
II

What of sixteenth-century Anabaptism? In light of my analysis, we see that, as with every movement of protest against the power of a literate elite, a very early struggle within the Anabaptist movement concerned whether it would claim its authority based on a connection to the charismatic, mystical, and direct voice of God, or whether it would claim its authority based on the written text. While detailed demonstration cannot be undertaken here, it will suffice to say that this controversy echoed clearly through the earliest years of the movement: between various fountainheads of Anabaptism (Swiss textualism and South German-Austrian charisma); in key disputes between early leaders (Menno’s textualism and David Joris’s charisma); and even as an internal struggle within key leaders (Hans Hut appealing to the text one moment and crying “Bibel, Beebel, Babel!” the next, proceeding on the basis of charismatic inspiration).

True to the predictable pattern, the textualists finally won out. Charismatic authority either self-destructed in anarchy (Muensterites, Baderites, Batenburgers) or was routinized and co-opted by the textualists (Menno Simons, for one, seemed at times quite conscious of this as he attempted to regather the flock after the Muenster debacle). The evolving triumph of the textualists runs on exactly parallel tracks to the Protestantization of the Anabaptist movement. Protestantism was the major social result in the sixteenth century of the spread of literacy. Luther and Calvin both were quite sure that the future of their movement depended on there being a “Bible on every kitchen table,” and they were quite correct in this perception. Once the heirs of the Anabaptist movement established that they were entitled to their own peculiar hermeneutical readings of the privileged text, there was little internal opposition to taking their place as one among other denominations within a larger Protestant identity. The “sect” designation eventually became an embarrassment to them.

Much of the historiographical discussion of whether Anabaptists are best understood as medieval monastics and mystics or as consistent Protestants or even as early bourgeois revolutionaries turns largely on whether our attention is focused on the charismatics or the textualists. Without getting into that discussion or the related controversies surrounding questions of Anabaptism and modernity, I would only suggest that in light of the present analysis,
Anabaptism was unquestionably a midwife in the emergence of the reading-formed, modern style of consciousness, if for no other reason than the key role it played in spreading literacy to the lower classes. This spread of literacy to all classes finally broke the power of the literate elite to control social processes through a monopoly on interpretation of the privileged texts. Some of the most fascinating pieces of Anabaptistica from that period are the prison dialogues recorded in The Martyrs Mirror, where an educated monk confronts an Anabaptist stump-preacher and is astounded to realize that the old mystifications of the biblical text won’t work here because this uneducated hedge-preacher has read the text for himself and has the audacity to hold to his own interpretation! “Where did you learn to read,” the monks howl! “Oh you Anabaptists are of the devil himself, which is proved by the fact that no sooner do you pour water on the head of an uneducated ignoramus than he can read not only the Bible but all that crazy literature you people write yourselves!” Likewise, while Luther and Calvin may have envisioned a Bible on every kitchen table, both of them would have preferred to retain the ability to establish one official line of interpretation of that Bible. The history of their movements is a testimony to the instability of that course once literacy and consciousness of the right to interpret for oneself were widespread among their followers.

While there is reason enough to suggest that in its earliest stages we might characterize Anabaptism as neither Protestant nor Catholic (i.e., during the period when appeals to charismatic authority for resistance to the Catholic or Protestant ruling classes carried as much weight as appeals to the privileged text), Anabaptism was very soon Protestantized. The textualists won out cleanly (future protesters within the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement would appeal to independent interpretations of the text but hardly ever to non-textual, charismatic authority), and Anabaptism fully embraced the reading-formed style of consciousness, itself producing texts of inner spiritual struggle and wrestling with God and conscience to rival those of Protestant piety anywhere.
The deterritorialization of the self is the essential feature that marks human entry into cyberspace. In the universe of infinite connection and possibility the only possible ontology is magical; reality as that which is invoked, the world conformant to will. The techniques of magical will, quintessentially linguistic, require a conscious mastery of the relationship between word and world. At the end of history comes the Word . . . . Ritual is the bridge between the ego and the post-historical self . . . . The speed-up stress of cyberspace, unleashed on the island self, forces being to seek shelter in the enduring forms of myth; neither one nor another, but this and that, choosing milieu over destination, multiplicity over deterritoriality, and subjectivity over factuality.

The gate between the historical self and post-historical post-humanity, the passage between a particular island of factuality and the absolute subjective, is ritual. Now we enter closets and bend ourselves to the dictates of fashion and gender, language and culture. Soon, we cast magic circles in sacred groves, speak the Word, and bend the World to our ends. The ego can not survive this burst of power, any more than the animal survived the flash of consciousness; what follows us we can now hear, but we can not speak of it.15

New styles of consciousness as they emerged have been the consciousness of social elites. It is no different with the postmodern style of consciousness, all pseudo-radical rhetoric notwithstanding. A new style of consciousness may be anti-establishmentarian in a political or economic sense, to the extent that the political and economic establishment is yet tied to the earlier style of consciousness. But it will be a rebellion of that society’s highly educated sector, the one that enjoys ongoing sustained access to the new communications technology on which the emerging style is based, in addition to the leisure required to establish it in society’s arts and sciences. As we consider possible constructive contributions from the Anabaptist tradition in a world characterized by postmodern consciousness, we should realize that at least for now, we are looking mainly at European-origin Mennonites of middle and
upper middle class status. It may well be that among other Mennonites (the majority!) the consciousness movement will solidify the reading-based style for some generations to come. There is an uneasiness about elitism among academic and urban professional purveyors of the Anabaptist Vision which, coupled with the natural suspicions we who keep our eggs in the reading-based basket have toward the emerging style of consciousness, tempts us to reject that consciousness with righteous indignation. Let us not forget, however, that when we speak of that elitist group of European-origin Mennonites, highly educated and with ongoing sustained access to the newest communications technologies, we are speaking very literally of our own biological progeny, our own sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I cannot dismiss them with righteous indignation, no matter how much their emerging style of consciousness confuses and threatens me.

So then, what contribution does Anabaptism have to make to a postmodern world? In the strictest, sixteenth century sense, none. The symbol of adult baptism no longer communicates much of anything to anyone, even within the group itself, no matter how many times it receives new interpretive dressing with which to present itself. And the central tenet that adults have the right to read and interpret religious texts for themselves and to hold personal religious convictions based on that interpretation is now axiomatic in the wider society and culture. Ironically, Anabaptism appears to have been made superfluous by the widespread acceptance of its own most basic principles. In a wider sense, though, contributions could well be made by the linear and spiritual descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, those who choose to include the story of those earlier Anabaptists as an integral part of their personal and group narrative in the postmodern world.

The positive contributions which could be made are hindered so long as Mennonite people continue to seek their sources of authority exclusively in the written word, that is, in a spiritual unity held firm by doctrinal conformity. This was a strategy of modernity, but conditions of communication have changed. Many of the various fundamentalisms of the word proliferating now are, in light of this discussion, inherently unstable. While claiming to point to the written word as the source for authority and rationality, they simultaneously and rigorously promote the very communications technologies that undermine reading in favor of visual image. This finally forces them into a position in which
their unity increasingly depends on the ability of their power elite to control both the interpretation of texts and the production and consumption of images among their group. This attempt to control is doomed by the complexity and number of information sources in postmodern society, leaving them in a position where, through such tactics as Disney boycotts and school book bannings, they must then try to establish control for society as whole. This is the material root of the current so-called “culture wars.” If Mennonites continue to seek their sources of rationality and self-identity exclusively in the written word, seeking to control acceptable symbol-meanings within the group through forced doctrinal conformity, they will only succeed in creating their own mini-versions of “culture war” among themselves. We see this process happening already, and it will be our own progeny who will be alienated from the group by it.

The emerging style of consciousness is skeptical of appeals to the written word as the exclusive source for authority and rationality. Such appeals ignore and attempt to deny the inherent relativism in all communicative acts. These appeals are a rationalization for forcing closure while hiding other, more material interests. They are a method for promoting unity by wielding the authoritarian power to exclude and divide. To employ a circle metaphor, while claiming to hold the center from crumbling, they spend their energy militantly patrolling the edges.

The source for authority and rationality that will be increasingly privileged in the postmodern world is the willingness to act individually and collectively, and is in fact speech-action itself. In postmodern society (as best as I can prognosticate after having warned explicitly against such prognostication) we would expect that once the dust begins to settle, it will be through a pluralistic religious life whose unity is based on shared ethical concerns, rather than doctrine or mystical claims, that the gospel message of love will be communicated with integrity.\textsuperscript{16} Here the legacy of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists has much to offer, because Anabaptist spirituality, the energy that motivated their speech-action in their time, is easily translated into concretely ethically-oriented propositions,\textsuperscript{17} as outlined below:

(1) \textit{The immediacy of the human relationship with God}. Each human being can approach God directly without mediation. God is ever and always present to the believer. There is no need to seek God through the mediation of a priest,
a textual canon, or any other human hierarchy. There are no times or places, special foods or ceremonies, which mediate communion with God. Antisacramentalism is a radical Protestant principle at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality.18

(2) Christian faith defined as a life of discipleship patterned on nonviolent love. This is the formative interpretive or hermeneutical principle at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality. The nature of the Christian life is understood as becoming increasingly more like Jesus, in spirit, mind, attitude, deed, and communion with God. This occurs as disciples seek to practice the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives. This cannot be understood in a legalistic fashion without perverting the very nature of the discipleship, because Jesus did not address directly and specifically most of the issues which disciples must address as we enter into the third millennium. To pretend otherwise, reading the limited texts we have pertaining to Jesus’ life and teachings as if they speak directly and unequivocally to all issues in our day, at best ignores or hides the aspect of interpretation and the dynamics of power contained therein. Stated more directly, it demonstrates a completely ahistorical, magical-type thinking that is out of place in Anabaptist discipleship. That discipleship in a postmodern context may positively understand itself as a process of becoming more like Jesus as noted above. It is absolutely centered on Jesus. At the same time, while unapologetically and self-consciously Christomorphic, there is no need to continue in the mode of Christocentric exclusivity. It is welcomed confirmation, and no threat to the integrity of one’s own truth, when congruent teachings and examples of a life of nonviolence come from sources other than Jesus and places other than the Christian religion.

(3) The corporate nature of the Christian faith. Although the Anabaptist understanding of discipleship emphasized the personal nature of commitment to that way of life, this personal commitment was not an extension of the philosophy of autonomous individualism that became dominant in modernity’s reading-based style of consciousness. This principle is at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality and has acted as a counterforce to modernist expressions of autonomous individualism, as found, for example, in disproportionate emphasis placed on “personal salvation” in American evangelical revivalist
tradition. I suggest it is this principle of the corporate nature of the Christian faith toward which some scholars were groping when they wrote of the “medieval/monastic” tendencies in Anabaptist spirituality. There is a less confusing source for the presence of this tendency in the collective history, however. For sociological reasons of survival in face of persecution, Anabaptists and later Mennonites were forced to rely on each other for spiritual and material support, and thus were not, as a group, attracted to autonomous individualism as a moral philosophy. When echoes of this philosophy did appear in Anabaptist/Mennonite collective experience, it was usually in the context of a split within the group, thus associating this philosophy with a sour taste in that experience. Despite recent incursions of autonomous individualism among Mennonites (mainly through contacts with Protestant fundamentalism), specifically Anabaptist spirituality has historically understood that discipleship patterned on nonviolent love, the defining characteristic of Christian faith, is a corporate, social concern. It is in and through the proving and sharing of the gathered group of disciples that wisdom and direction are given to the individual for addressing existential issues in a manner consistent with the pattern of Jesus’s life and teachings, especially where these issues are far different from and more complex than anything a first-century person, or a sixteenth century person, could have imagined. That is, a lifestyle of the politics of Jesus, as we move into the third millennium, is plainly and affirmatively a communal endeavor.

While upholding central Christian ethical concerns, this approach is inherently open to sources of truth originating in the historical experiences of others. It does not force us into either closing ourselves off to other sources of truth or coercing others into accepting our truth. If, as we move toward a world characterized by the postmodern style of consciousness, Mennonites and other Anabaptist Christians begin to understand what we are doing in these concretely ethically-oriented categories, we open the doors to participate in the good news of God’s love and to communicate that good news with integrity with our neighbors and fellow planetary inhabitants. My hope is for an increasing appropriation of this vision of life and of Christian faith in the postmodern world.19

This leads me to conclude that in our state of limited knowledge about the future and the natural anxiety that it entails, especially for those of us locked
emotionally and psychologically into a reading-formed style of consciousness, it is probably wisest to avoid the extremes of denial and apocalyptic visions of the decline of civilization on the one hand, and the ecstatic New Age hymns to the dawning Age of Aquarius on the other. In the face of an open and unknown future, we see the theological wisdom of Sir John M. Templeton’s “humble approach,” recognizing that human understanding and comprehension of God is also open and that current formulations must be taken as working hypotheses rather than as dogmas, set in stone.\textsuperscript{20} On the positive side, we can teach our children good communal values, teach them to love one another and to care for the weak; then we must turn them over in trust to do their best in the world. After we have done this, we are left to live with the anxiety that their world is not our world, and that we must let them be in their world – which is to say, I suppose, we must put our trust in God.

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} This essay was read at the Anabaptists and Postmodernity conference held at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, in August 1998.
\textsuperscript{5} This use of computer hardware and software is only an analogy. The assumption that the brain and body (the physical) is separate and separable from the mind (information) is so much a habit of our thinking that this analogy runs the risk of continuing the Cartesian model. My perspective is a conscious if not always successful attempt to understand brain and mind as a profound and inseparable unity. From this understanding, it follows not only that the physical aspect of the brain is intricately connected to the environment to which it is exposed (e.g., in the strength and complexity of the synaptic network) but also that the ways the brain responds to stimuli (what sort of mind the brain develops) are also intimately connected to cultural factors. The biological brain has developed and develops at the speed of biological evolution. However, the configuration of the brain, what sort of mind the brain produces, develops at the speed of cultural evolution. The entire system of brain, mind, body and culture, therefore, are best understood as an organic unity in which what occurs in each area produces direct but essentially unpredictable effects in each of the other areas. This picture is very different in function and development from Descartes’ mechanical-clock-plus-soul model. For a useful discussion, see Antonio Damasio, \textit{Descartes’ Error:}
Anyone interested in further exposure to this emerging high-speed visuals-formed style of consciousness could, via a number of websites, spend some time with the work of virtual-reality-architect Marcos Novak and his Advanced Design Research Group at the University of Texas at Austin. Marcos’s ventures into “liquid architecture” point in the direction of this emerging style of consciousness in its relation to self and space. Says Marcos: “Most people associate architecture with built materials – wood, brick, mortar and stone. The things I do involve building architecture out of information . . . When we experience the outside world . . . we do so with our inner consciousness. The world remains outside but our experience is internal . . . . Our consciousness itself comes from our ability to create a pocket of virtual space inside our minds that’s a mirror of the actual space outside. What I try to do is take this mirror of the world in the seat of my consciousness and put it back outside my body, in the public realm. I can give it to you
to share. And you can do that as well . . . . Virtual reality is about visiting possible worlds. Discussion of this work is found in Keith J. Devlin, *Life By the Numbers* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1998), 54f.

15 Mark Pesce, “Ritual and the Virtual,” from his website at www.hyperreal.org/~mpesce.


18 There is plenty of room for investment of the sacred in sacramental ritual ‘from below.’ Postmodern Anabaptists are likely to appreciate a wide range of experiential and experimental acquaintance with many styles of communal worship. These are understood as human practices, expressions of particular cultural styles, and not as exclusive rituals for divine mediation. In light of this analysis, however, I am skeptical of the recent advocacy among some of the Mennonite tradition for a return to ritual practices most commonly associated with the Roman Catholic tradition, as I suspect this is less motivated by postmodern playfulness than by attempted retreat from modernism itself.

19 The counter-evidence, of course, is the rapid growth of fundamentalist and strongly leader-focused churches and congregations in the past two decades, reversing the trends of previous decades for people to leave these churches and congregations for mainline denominations. (Cf. Scott A. Mathias, “Strict, Conservative Churches Growing,” *Christianity Today*, April 15, 1999, 15). It may be that as the symbolic self seems to come unglued as we move ever more fully into a postmodern style of consciousness, people will seek refuge from their anxiety in such authoritarian religion. This may equally be a short-term swing of the pendulum, significant for us mainly because it is happening in our time. Perceived as a pendulum swing, such a movement would indicate not the attractiveness of such churches for populations developing the postmodern style of consciousness, but rather as an anxious strategy of modernity in reaction to that developing style. It will take much more sustained and nuanced investigation than has been done so far to really understand who is joining to these churches and congregations; how congruent congregants’ self-understanding is with that of the leadership; how long people stay in these types of congregations and where they go when they do leave; and whether children (those now growing up with sustained exposure to the new communications technology) are retained into adulthood in such congregations.

20 John M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach: Scientists Discover God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981). Given that modern human beings have the characteristic of self-consciousness, the evolutionary idea leads to the conclusion that this characteristic was formed from the bottom up, that it evolved from more primitive states. Thus, in theology, psychology, or any other discipline that takes the evolutionary idea seriously, we cannot continue to theorize on the basis of an explicit or implicit assumption that human self-consciousness appeared full-blown in human history. Even were we to apply the model of punctuated equilibrium to the history of human consciousness (a model assuming rapid advances and plateaus in evolutionary development rather than a steady, slow development), we must assume the likelihood of a number of intermediary phases in the
development of consciousness. This means generation upon generation of biologically human ancestors who did not at all share the modern style of consciousness. This, in turn, means that it would have been impossible for them to have had the same understanding of God as do people who have the modern style of consciousness. Therefore, whether you place the energy for the movement in the development of human consciousness itself, or choose to see that development as a reflection of the Hegelian unfolding Divine Consciousness, or perhaps view these as mutually interactive, one must see that there is evolutionary development in the human God concept. Divine wisdom and self-understanding cannot be locked for eternity in ancient texts or any other gnostic source of authority. Future generations of human beings will have quite different understandings of God consciousness and self-understanding than we do today.