

## **Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy**

A SYNOPSIS

*Readers will be able to reconstruct much of Ted Grimsrud's argument (the original article was published in MQR 78.3 [2004]) from the respondents' comments in the papers that follow, as well as from Grimsrud's reply, also printed below. However, the following short synopsis of the article may be helpful. –Editor*

Early in “Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy,” Grimsrud asks, “Is the traditional Mennonite ‘two kingdom’ stance, in which Christian convictions are understood primarily to be directly relevant for the faith community’s inner existence but not for that of the broader society, adequate for determining our understanding of citizenship today?” His answer to this question is no, but his answers to the series of questions that shape his main argument are a resounding yes in every case.

In developing his view, Grimsrud contends that “three distinct stories” must be taken into account: the Anabaptist Story, whose core elements he identifies as noted below; the Democracy Story (“the good America” that “welcomed migrating Mennonites” and “served as a beacon of hope for self-determination and freedom”); and the Empire Story (“the other America” given to “conquest, domination and widespread violence”). The distinction between the Democracy Story and the Empire story is vital because it allows us to separate our “participating in democracy” from “our potential complicity in militaristic state violence.”

Among the questions Grimsrud poses are these:

- “Do American Anabaptist Christians have a responsibility to aggressively seek to take their pacifist convictions into the public square in a way that might influence our government?”
- “Do we Mennonites . . . have the responsibility to speak out openly and assertively in contributing to democracy by playing a role in the public conversation by which society arrives at governmental policies?”
- “As members of our ‘powerful’ civil society and as pacifists with theological convictions and a long history that point toward a rejection of the Empire Story, do we have a specific responsibility to become politically active as an expression of our Anabaptist faith?”

Grimsrud contends that four core Anabaptist convictions provide the necessary guidance for fully participating in the democratic conversation: (1) THE FREE CHURCH is well positioned to “perceive the difference between the Democracy Story and the Empire Story”; (2) REFUSAL TO FIGHT IN WAR can assist “nonpacifist neighbors better see how the Empire story so powerfully subverts the Democracy Story we all profess to affirm”; (3) AFFIRMATION OF ”UPSIDE-DOWN SOCIAL POWER” permits supporting democracy movements while presenting “a theological critique of violence and domination” lest such movements become another Empire Story; (4) COMMITMENT TO ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS allows for redefining economics and for “constructing an alternative community.”

Any limits to Anabaptist participation in public policy conversations must not arise out of “self-imposed restrictions” of the kind that Grimsrud sees inherent in the approach taken by Ted Koontz and Stanley Hauerwas. Koontz, author of “Thinking Theologically about War Against Iraq” (*MQR* 77. 1 (2003)), distinguishes a ‘first language’ (the language of faith) from a ‘second language’ (the language of pragmatic or secular conversations), and urges Christians to concentrate mostly on the former. Grimsrud finds support for his own position in the work of Jeffrey Stout, who asserts, for instance, that “the authentic democratic conversation welcomes all conversing citizens openly to express whatever premises ground their claims” (See Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition* [Princeton, 2004].) Both Stout and Grimsrud reject Hauerwas’s “antipathy toward ‘liberalism’” and his insistence on “letting the church be the church” in such a way that “undercuts Christian identification with the Democracy Story.”

Grimsrud concludes that it is both possible and necessary “to enter America’s public conversation boldly as citizens and as Anabaptist Christians – recognizing that we would not be faithful to either calling were we to separate them.”