Responses to John Kampen

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It would be tempting simply to say yea and amen to the direction of John Kampen's paper, since I am in fundamental agreement with the direction Kampen sets and the questions he raises. I am not going to speak to the wealth of resources that this paper has collected concerning the conversation about Mennonite identity, other than to underline Kampen's first point: that nearly all of this conversation has been carried out among Mennonites of European descent and, I might add, among men, in the United States and Canada, without taking into account both the increasing diversity of the Mennonite family in the United States and Canada and the now-global nature of the Mennonite churches.

I also found striking and convincing his second major area of discussion, that of the problem of anti-Semitism for Mennonites. Kampen argues that by claiming our identity as Believers churches, we are able to identify ourselves with those in the German churches who resisted the Third Reich. Instead, Mennonites need to face the reality that some of us, specifically in Germany and Canada, but also elsewhere, supported the Nazi regime and by extension its policies which led to the Holocaust. Kampen asks whether in response to this reality Mennonites today could "develop a biblical hermeneutic that challenges . . . Christian triumphalism" towards Jewish people. He points to the recent work among biblical scholars and historians of antiquity which may provide a backdrop for the construction of such a hermeneutic, a list from which Mennonite authors are absent. One Mennonite writer who has specifically addressed this question comes not from the Mennonite academy but from the front lines of the Christian Peacemaker Teams. Kathleen Kern, in her book *We Are the Pharisees*, deals both with the biblical material and with the problem

of late-twentieth-century Mennonites who "see the Nazi era as a historical aberration" and "believe that anti-Semitism is on the wane."[1]

In a third point, Kampen explores the shared history but different experiences of African Americans and white Mennonites, especially in the United States. He calls for a re-examination of the scriptural tradition Mennonites have claimed with an eye to what he sees as its "Germanization." I can only agree, recalling an exercise I like to carry out with students in introductory Bible classes. I tell them to turn to the maps at the back of their Bibles and find the one that shows the largest amount of territory for the biblical world. Almost without exception, the maps include much of Mesopotamia and Mediterranean Europe but are cut off right at the Nile Delta. Have the biblical mapmakers simply forgotten the call of the psalmist to "Let Ethiopia (what we now know as northern Sudan) hasten to stretch out its hands to God" (Ps. 68:31)? Or have they chosen to ignore this and other similar passages, and if so, why?

While Kampen further suggests that Mennonites need to consider the ideological reading of texts that has characterized African American biblical studies in recent years, he might also have indicated a need for a different reading of our own history. I was struck with this point recently in coming across the memoirs of Peter Hartman, a Mennonite who lived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia during the American Civil War. I learned that the farm on whose land the buildings of Eastern Mennonite University now stand was a slave-owning farm. Hartman insists that Mennonites in the South were opposed to slavery, although he admits that they did exchange their labor with slave labor, he himself at times working with slaves on neighboring farms. Hartman recounts several stories of mistreatment of slaves that he witnessed, but hastens to add that some slave owners he knew were good to their slaves.[2] One is reminded of the comment by Edward Bell, author of *Slaves in the Family*, that for whites dealing with their past of slave ownership, it always seems that one's own slave-owning family were "good masters" while the farm down the road had "bad masters."[3] How much more deeply are we willing to elaborate and nuance the stories of our own past, whether on responses to slavery in the nineteenth century or on racist personal and institutional behaviors in the twentieth?

It is Kampen's final point that I want to respond to in more detail. After providing background on current literature about the process of globalization, Kampen suggests that Mennonites should see themselves as one of the many peoples seeking a way in this globalizing reality. He gives extensive attention to the work of Joel Kotkin in *Tribes*, noting three important definitional aspects of Kotkin's "global tribes": "a strong ethnic identity," "a global network," and "a passion for technical and other knowledge." It seems that ethnicity as a factor is absolutely fundamental to Kotkin's case, which raises a question about Kampen's suggestion that Mennonites see themselves within such a framework. In what sense can the global Mennonite community be thought of as an "ethnic" community? Kampen offers perspectives from a quarter-century of Mennonite sociological research on identity questions.

Kampen suggests that "the assertion of some common identity based in the Bible has been a perceived manner of moving Mennonites beyond perceived ethnic limitations." He later suggests that the African American appropriation of the Bible for survival and quality of life provides an alternative to the triumphalist Western Christian biblical hermeneutic which, at least by suggestion, he believes that many Canadian and U.S. Mennonites share. This move in relation to the Scriptures could be made by an enhanced Mennonite understanding of the sixteenth-century documents of Anabaptist suffering and survival. Edgar McKnight has recently offered a perspective, drawing on a piece of our sixteenth-century story that might not at first glance be included in Kampen's proposal but could perhaps actually enhance it. Reading the story of the Anabaptists in Münster, McKnight applauds "their reading of the Scriptures so as to engender an encounter between believers and the text." Other Christians, perhaps including many contemporary Mennonites, fall into equally problematic positions of striving for "guidance and control" through "dogmatic and historical frameworks." McKnight offers instead "a comprehensive hermeneutical system" with movement between circles of praxis, doctrine, history, and literature. And he emphasizes that it is the biblical readings of Christians in the Two-Thirds World who have emphasized the praxis dimension of biblical reading, in a way similar to the African American methods described by Kampen.[4]

I would suggest one further perspective that both draws on and moves beyond ethnicity as a marker of Mennonite identity. This perspective speaks

to how Canadian and U.S. Mennonites might demonstrate acceptance and commitment to a shared fate with Mennonites around the world. While accepting that ethnicity "is usually conceptualized as a common origin or culture resulting from shared activities and identity based on some mixture of language, religion, race, and/or ancestry," Charles Ragin and Jeremy Hein add that "ethnicity is profoundly *contextual* (it takes many forms, depending on associated conditions) and deeply *interactive* (it is closely intertwined with political and economic institutions, events, and processes."[5] It is within the contextual and interactive dimensions of the global Mennonite network, I suggest, that both the problem and the potential of Mennonite ethnicity lies.

Kotkin, in addition to the central characteristics cited above, stresses that global tribes are characterized by a moral and ethical foundation.[6] Recently Mennonite World Conference (MWC) acknowledged the centrality of such understanding with the publication of *From Anabaptist Seed* by C. Arnold Snyder. The introduction to this slight pamphlet underlines the author's belief that "it is possible to speak of an 'historical core' of Anabaptist-related identity."[7] Based on that core, Snyder suggests three areas, all significantly ethical in character, that mark "living the faith": truth-telling, economic sharing, and pacifism.[8] Thus the story of Anabaptist origins, with its insistence on practical discipleship, connects to the importance of the moral aspects of a global identity as described by Kotkin.

For the purposes of this response I will discuss only economic sharing. It would be fascinating to consider how such sharing has shaped one piece of this global identity – the partnerships built over the last seventy-five years between Mennonites of German descent in Canada, Germany, Russia, the Ukraine, Paraguay, Brazil, and Mexico. While I have done no in-depth research which would demonstrate it, I am convinced that concrete and significant economic sharing has characterized this slice of the tribe. The recent history of Mennonites in Paraguay would offer an important example.[9] Statistics I do have, however, paint a different picture of other clans within the global Mennonite tribe.

The budget of the MWC is assessed to the member conferences on a "fair share" basis, determined by factors related to comparative international economic data (specifically Gross National Product) and conference-based statistics. Thus, for example, the fair share in 2000 for conferences in Africa,

with a total membership of 356,849, is one cent per member per year. The fair share for Latin America, with 61,482 members, is twelve cents per member. For conferences in Canada and the United States, with total membership of 250,298, the fair share is $1.51 (US) per member per year. The general experience of Mennonite World Conference is that member conferences in general have not met their fair share of this budget. Here I think the primary question is how Mennonites in Canada and the United States have responded to the MWC request. In 1998, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada contributed a little over a third of their fair share, the Mennonite Church in the U.S. contributed slightly more than half, and the General Conference Mennonite Church in the U.S. contributed fifty-seven percent. Statistics are no better for other U.S. and Canadian Mennonite/Brethren in Christ groups. Altogether, those contributions amounted to forty-seven cents per member (in those groups) for the year 1998, a sum embarrassing even to mention in light of North American Mennonite contributions to our own schools and colleges, congregations, church, and para-church agencies.[10]

It might be asked whether this contribution record really expresses a commitment to global economic sharing among Mennonites. Certainly there are a variety of other ways by which such sharing goes on, both formally and informally. It might also be argued that contributions to MWC are a drop in the bucket in the face of the kind of economic sharing which would truly make an impact on our global tribe. But I suggest that when Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada find it so hard to connect to an organization which by design is determined to shift the balance of decision-making power in the direction of the worldwide Mennonite majority, we have not gotten very far. It must be noted in contrast that Mennonites in Europe are consistently on top of their fair share contributions to MWC, which are actually higher per member than those for churches on this side of the Atlantic. As a topic for another reflection, beginning with Kampen's thoughtful comments on the foundation for our tribe of shared struggle and survival, we might ask what it is in the experience of Mennonites in Europe which propels them more strongly toward the body that at present most clearly puts a face on the global Mennonite tribe.

Notes

[1] Kathleen Kern, *We Are the Pharisees* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 38-77, 122.
[2] Peter S. Hartman, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Lancaster, PA: Eastern Mennonite Associated Libraries and Archives, 1964), 5-6.
[3] Edward Ball, speaking on WSLU, North Country Public Radio, "Readers and Writers On-the-air: Call-in on Contemporary Literature," Nov. 4, 1999.
[4] Edgar V. McKnight, *Jesus Christ in History and Scripture: A Poetic and Sectarian Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 313-17.
[5] Charles C. Ragin and Jeremy Hein, "The Comparative Study of Ethnicity: Methodological and Conceptual Issues," in *Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods,* ed. John H. Stanfield II and Rutledge M. Dennis (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 255.
[6] Joel Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion, and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random House, 1992), 24-25.
[7] Larry Miller, "Preface" to C. A. Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 5-6.
[8] Snyder, 37-47.
[9] Edgar Stoesz and Muriel T. Stackley, *Gardens in the Wilderness: Mennonite Communities in the Paraguayan Chaco, 1927-1997* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1999).
[10] Statistics provided by Kathryn Good, Director of Administrative Services for Mennonite World Conference. Since that time, integration on the Canadian and U.S. sides, and separation of the Mennonite Church Canada and the Mennonite Church USA, have changed the structures, and it is not clear how that will affect the sense of participation in MWC.