Tom Yoder Neufeld

Tom Yoder Neufeld is associate professor of Religious Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario.

John Kampen's essay deals with a question that continues to vex Mennonites: How to think about and nurture a sense of identity that takes into full account our multi-national and multi-ethnic identity and that moves "beyond perceived ethnic limitations." Kampen points out that Mennonite sociologists, in trying to speak to the issue of Mennonite identity, work with the analytical categories of ethnicity and assimilation. He notes that such analysis is marked by a certain "quaintness," in that it overlooks that Mennonites are both Caucasian and Christian, and thus share in their identity in these important respects with the majority of the population. It is thus inept at coming to grips with what has become a global Mennonite community of faith. This is an important point, even if Kampen does not sufficiently recognize that, ironically, "Mennonites of North America" includes persons and congregations of African American, Hispanic, First Nation, and Asian derivation, not to mention the many who bring no particular ethnic pedigree to begin with. The 'global' reality of diversity is increasingly resident 'at home.' But to acknowledge this would only sharpen the importance of the issues Kampen raises.

    As an alternative to a simple minority identity, Kampen draws heavily on his deep familiarity with Jewish history and scholarship, as well as on his long engagement with the African-American community, believing that these two realities provide important challenges to how Mennonites might forge a

sense of identity for the future. Germane to the identity of both communities is the experience of suffering, struggle, and survival – for Jews the Holocaust, for African-Americans slavery and racism. Kampen suggests these as "the basis for a shared identity in the global Mennonite church movement."

In order to learn from these communities, Kampen proposes that Mennonites first come to terms with their own anti-Semitism, both by acknowledging their complicity and by thoroughly rethinking their missionary stance (a "Christian triumphalism" buttressed by anti-Jewish biblical hermeneutic). Second, Mennonites can learn from an emerging African American liberationist hermeneutic of Scriptures, but only if they again first come to terms with their complicity in the racism from which they have benefited; in effect, they need to divest themselves of their privileged place in a new global reality that benefits the few at the expense of the many.

In the new global reality in which Mennonites must forge their identity, the old *ethnic* identity is inadequate. Instead, Kampen suggests Mennonites come to see themselves as one of Joel Kotkin's "global tribes," held together by a mythology of origin which, like that of Jews and African Americans, has as its constituent elements suffering and survival – elements that marked the experience of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, of the Mennonites of Ukraine in the mid-twentieth century, of Ethiopian Mennonites in past decades, and of Congolese, Colombian, and Central American Mennonites in the present.

I am grateful to Kampen for a deeply thoughtful and thought-provoking exploration of the question of Mennonite identity. My response can only touch on a fraction of the issues he has brought to the table, however. Let me begin by praising his attempt to find a sustainable identity that transcends old ethnic identities, even as it incorporates them. That is an ongoing personal project of mine: 1) I grew up in a Russian Mennonite home (mother, Kanadier Kleine Gemeinde background; father, Russländer Mennonite Brethren), but in Austria where the Mennonites I knew were all Austrians who had only recently been Catholic or Lutheran. They were no less Mennonite for all that. 2) I am married to a Mennonite of Ohio Swiss Mennonite background on the one side and of French Mennonite vintage on the other. 3) I am now a member of the second oldest Mennonite church in Canada, which, due to God's wonderful sense of humor, has become home to a Central American refugee community of approximately sixty persons. It is a wonderfully benign growth in the belly

of an old body, constantly making any ethnic self-description both inevitable and instantly problematic, if not destructive. 4) At the school where I teach, we present "pre-ethnic" Anabaptist history and theology as a publicly available set of perspectives and convictions. But we sometimes struggle not to allow ethnic definitions to determine the parameters for our study of Mennonite history, sociology, music, and literature. So I applaud Kampen's attempt to find a centre of identity larger than ethnicity. I also agree that the twin themes of suffering and survival are in fact common ground for many Mennonites around the world, most especially among brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America.

Having said that, I'm restless about the specific nature of his proposal. Let me share some of the reasons for my restlessness, even misgivings, in no particular order. First, I wonder whether making the foundation of identity the suffering and survival of the few at the hands of the many does not, ironically, make it difficult to see oneself as complicit in the sins of the many. I strongly suspect that when suffering and survival become "the mythology of origin," it is only a short distance to making that suffering the *sine qua non*. Ironically, such a mythology can lead to the moral myopia Kampen rightly laments. Further, such a mythology runs the danger of making survival itself the objective of corporate efforts. We see the effects of such a mythology at work in places such as Palestine or the former Yugoslavia. Suffering and survival do not in and of themselves provide an identity that is open and hospitable, least of all toward those who threaten the survival of one's group, 'tribe,' or *ethnos*.

Second, suffering and survival are essential to the history of some, perhaps even many, Mennonites past and present. They do, as Kampen suggests, provide a powerful bond among Mennonites of various backgrounds and nationalities. I have witnessed it in the interaction between 1920s Mennonite immigrants with a still-fresh memory of their suffering in the Ukraine and Mennonite immigrants of the 1990s with an even fresher memory of their suffering in Central America. I give thanks for stories of faithful suffering and stories of sometimes miraculous survival. But what brought the "new" Mennonites into the Mennonite family of faith was, interestingly, not the *Martyrs Mirror* nor the stories of persecution in the Soviet Union. It was the good news of new life in Christ. I would contend that this is true for the vast bulk of the world-wide Mennonite community of faith. The mythology of

origin that has attracted these diverse folk, many of whom have known suffering as intense as any the "old" Mennonites have experienced, are not stories of past suffering and survival – even as those themes will hopefully become part of the rich texture of our shared narrative – but a larger mythology of origin, one shared with the *whole* of the Christian community: the biblical story of redemption and liberation through Jesus Christ.

That was no less so in the sixteenth century. Our Anabaptist forebears emerged as an identifiable group because they pushed the implications of a myth of origin *shared with the broader Christian community* beyond the tolerance level of that larger community. As a result they experienced suffering and ultimately the ravages of ethnicization. They were the effect of marginalization by the larger Christian community which, Anabaptists held, was not heeding its own foundational tradition.

The subsequent struggle for survival played havoc with the theology that brought Mennonites into being in the first place. At the cost of oversimplification, suffering and the attempt to survive it resulted in becoming an *ethnos*. But ethnicity and evangelical theology don't mix well. Just as ethnicity played havoc with theology and faith, so theology has repeatedly played havoc with ethnicity, resulting in a deep ambivalence whenever Mennonites have wanted to be a church and not simply a tribe. Ethnic North American Mennonites of European derivation have been reluctant to dilute their ethnic identity. But they know that if they protect such an identity for its own sake, they betray the core demands of a gospel that called them into being. Mennonites have dealt with this conundrum in various contradictory ways: some have chosen to exist as living fossils; others have done mission work *beyond* the confines of 'our' community; some have become open communities with an identity crisis. I wonder whether suffering and survival as central elements of identity help to move us into a more global reality, or push us further back in the direction of ethnicity in the most problematic sense of the term.

I would therefore argue, thirdly, that the true mythology of origin at the root of our existence as a global Mennonite community is a Christian gospel shared broadly with the larger Christian community. It is a mythology that is in the end more destabilizing than it is supporting of our present identity if conceived of ethnically, most especially among the old *ethnoi* of Swiss and

Russian Mennonites. And that is how it has been from the beginning, as it should be now. As Mennonites we are heirs first and foremost not of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, but of first-century Jewish heretics who transgressed the boundaries of their community and opened the door to 'us' outsiders. Why? Because it lay at the heart of their particular *Jewish* theology that the creator of *all* favored *all*; that the *Jewish* messiah was indeed the Christ of *all* humanity. They were able, albeit with considerable difficulty and no little pain, to come to think of this convulsion in their faith culture as 'good news' – good news not only for those hitherto outside but also for themselves as insiders. As a culture, as a community of faith, they enacted the risky venture of being willing *not* to survive. They had learned from their master that their survival lay precisely in their willingness to risk their lives, individually and corporately. The risk, regrettably, was real. And they paid an enormous price. Arguably the most tragic development for the Christian community of faith is that the 'guests,' the new members of the family, came to displace the 'hosts' and finally to push them out of their own home. Kampen's attempt to sensitize his fellow Mennonites to anti-Semitism suggests that this inhospitality continues.

Jesus' words to the effect that if you hang onto life you will lose it, and, conversely, if you are willing to lose it for his sake and that of the gospel, you will gain it, is relevant not only to individuals but to groups attempting to settle the question of their identity. I would argue that this is precisely how Mennonites came to be a global 'tribe' to begin with. Not suffering and survival, however deeply empathetic we should be with suffering and grateful for survival, but promise, gospel, and mission, is an adequate explanation of how the Mennonite community got to be global. They need to be the essential elements in a mythology of origin that can sustain an identity that is open and transformative in a profound Christian sense.

Some will counter that Mennonites are not a religious group devoid of ethnic expression, nor should or even can they be. Of course it is true that all religiosity finds cultural expression and becomes enculturated, sometimes even resulting in an *ethnos*. But the important question, since we are speaking of a mythology of origin, is from what such cultural concretions emerge and what sustains them. I fear that if a mythology of *suffering* and *survival* are to be the source of sustenance, then the 'tribe' that will emerge will be in danger of not being willing to risk for the sake of "the other." It may not in the end be a

people in mission, the kind of mission that has a chance to radically affect the tribe's self-identity. It might well become reactionary at its core, as our history as Mennonites attests over and over again.

An identity focused on its own survival has precious little to do with that part of the global Mennonite community that is vulnerable, that knows suffering, but that nevertheless is madly trying to get word out – not about what it means to be 'Mennonite' but about what it means to experience Christ and to follow him in life. In such places 'Anabaptism' is increasingly invoked not as a historical memory but as a mode of behavior in the present. Not survival but *self-giving* is more likely to be at the core of the sustaining mythology of these Mennonites.

Kampen may be restless with me here. I wonder whether he might not hear my mission-oriented comments as heading in the direction of exactly the Christian anti-Judaism he understands to be still a largely unacknowledged part of the Mennonite ethos, participating in the triumphalism of the larger Christian tradition that has had such a devastating effect. Such is not my intention. But I simply do not believe that a mythology of origin not centered in the inherently transgressive confession that Jesus is Lord is big enough to sustain us as a global, faithful, Christian (as in messianic) Mennonite community. I would rather let some arguments give way to a humble and even contrite silence, than to allow a confession that "Jesus is Lord" and a requisite missionary stance fall into the category of "triumphalism." It may well be, given the enormity of our sin, that our witness can at best be done with "respectful whispers rather than in tones of lordly triumph."[1] A hundred years of contrite silence is, however, still preferable to cutting off the witness at its knees. Not to keep that confession alive even as *"Arkan Disziplin"* (Bonhöffer) is to betray precisely those Jews of the first century who transgressed their borders and ethnic boundaries to share their Jewish messianic 'heresy' with grateful Gentiles. It is adherence, after all, to Jesus' peaceable lordship "over all" that stands in greatest tension with the arrogance and hatred that paved the way to the Holocaust. It is not adherence to, but betrayal of, Jesus as Lord over all that rendered Christians blind to the unimaginable horror of slavery and racism.

Coming to terms with anti-Judaism and racism is central to the agenda of North American Mennonites of European origin. Many of our brothers and sisters here and in other places on the globe may well have their own histories

of horrors that set the context for their witness. They, and together with them we too, will need to find a way not simply to survive but to live within such circumstances with hope, and with a stance of engagement and transformation befitting those who know not only the cross but Easter, who know not only about suffering but about resurrection. Easter is finally not about survival but about rebirth, about re-creation. It was Easter that let our Jewish forebears foolishly risk their identity for our sake. We have little alternative to do so too, if we do not want to betray our origins either in the first or the sixteenth century. Such "losing oneself" has nothing to do with assimilation to the prevailing culture. It has everything to do with participation in the scandalously globalizing and yes, tribalizing, phenomenon called the body of Christ.

To conclude, I will return to the personal note I began with. I do not have the luxury of dealing with these questions in abstraction or from a distance. Every week I must answer the question of who is a Mennonite together with a Bob Kernahan, a Mario Cabrero, or a Susan Kampenson. And I must do that within the mostly generous but sometimes also wary embrace of the second oldest Mennonite Church in Canada. The only thing that allows me to answer the question in a way that affirms a common identity is a shared rootage in a myth of origin and a myth of destiny that is as old as biblical faith, centered on the confession that Jesus is Lord. Who is a Mennonite? Whatever else, a Christian who believes in Christ and who follows him in life. Any other answer betrays, I fear, the origins of the Mennonite community and curtails its global reality.

Notes

[1] Mark Noll, "A Peace of God?" *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* (Nov.-Dec. 1999):43.