A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics.* Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001.

The design on the cover of this new collection of essays – one hand in the soil, the other in the sky – reflects a theme that has marked the author's theological work for the past twenty years. In order for us contemporary Christians to *engage* prophetically and lovingly the creation and culture in which we are rooted, we must reach toward the divine that *transcends* nature and history.

Mennonites and Classical Theology, a feast of Reimer's writings since the late 1970s, is essential reading for graduate students, teachers, and church leaders interested in current conversations about Mennonite theology and ethics. Reimer offers a critique of modern/postmodern thought in the West and notes its impact on Christian theology, traces limitations he sees in recent Mennonite theological work in light of "the classical imagination," and proposes correctives. While this book is not for the theologically fainthearted (some background in theology or philosophy will lubricate your way through the more than 550 pages of text), Reimer sets out his argumentation in a straightforward way, accessible to anyone with intellectual curiosity and a theological dictionary at hand.

Because most of the essays were previously published but widely scattered in various sources, this new publication permits a sustained look at Reimer's developing theological voice. His work is notably consistent in fundamental direction since the early '80s. He good-humoredly notes specific shifts in his assessments of the work of Gordon Kaufman and John H. Yoder as a result of personal contacts. He states that since 1980 he has "moved in the Barthian direction of saying that good theology has its own dogmatic ground distinct from and before all political ethics" (444), and notes that his earlier emphasis on God's absolute freedom "seems now to be too voluntaristic a notion" and his view of civil institutions "too one-sidedly negative" (487). But his critique of post-Enlightenment thought and his call for renewed emphasis on the transcendence of God and attentiveness to classical Christian doctrines and creeds remain unshaken.

That Reimer preserved the original essays (annotating each and setting it in context) marks the project with a certain freshness and vulnerability. This strength, however, is also the book's greatest weakness: it is frequently repetitive.

Additionally, even with the annotations, the reader must make a labyrinthine effort to identify Reimer's fullest and strongest argumentation for his repeated claims and to see clearly how his theological argumentation developed over the years.

The range of topics addressed in Reimer's work in addition to classical theology is remarkable – among others, religion and science, theology and the modern university, Jewish Christianity, exorcism, homosexuality, apparitions, policing and the civil order, imagination and utopian movements, free will, and the believers church. What holds them together, according to Reimer, are several convictions. First, "the classical imagination . . . is far richer and more fruitful for Christian systematic theology than acknowledged in much modern and postmodern thinking" (227). Second, ancient dogmatic thinking was imaginative and dynamic, not "abstract and doctrinaire petrification of certain dogmas with little sensitivity to changing times" (227). Third, Mennonites in their focus on ethics "dedicated to radical non-violent love ('pacifism'), dare not attempt an end-run around creedal antiquity on the way to the biblical text itself. . . ." (554). A trinitarian theology and commitment to Jesus as both human and divine are essential so that "faithfulness to the normativity of Jesus is not one of pragmatism or a legitimizing of the modern project but one of obedience to Jesus as the *Cosmic Lord*, because what he is, does and teaches is eternally true or intrinsically right" (198).

Reimer's turn to classic theology was a response to a shattering critique of post-Enlightenment assumptions. Under the influence of Canadian philosopher George Grant, Reimer had a kind of "intellectual conversion" in the mid-70's. He was moved by Grant's belief that ecological disaster, uninhibited exploitation of the weak, and the threat of nuclear annihilation were "in some sense intrinsically linked to the Enlightenment and the triumph of technical reason." (162) Reimer began to see how the development of modern philosophical thought, culminating in Nietzsche, left humans without a sense of divine transcendence, no longer accountable to an objective realm of absolute norms for ethics. He also began to articulate his deep concern about the modern preoccupation with historical time.

When historical time is absolutized, Reimer explains, it undercuts the coherence of Christian confession of faith in a divine reality which transcends history. The meaning of transcendence is redefined; it no longer refers to a

reality *external* to history but to a future hope or transformation *within* history. Reimer passionately rejects the assumption behind future-oriented theology that "one gradually gets closer to God," for "all historical moments are equidistant from the divine, because the divine is by definition beyond time and space" (157). Classical theology recognizes that "the end of history is no closer to God than the beginning or middle. . . . Only in this classical model can the ultimate dignity and value of every historical moment and creature under the providence of God be safeguarded" (192).

Reimer argues that ancient Trinitarian theology imaginatively and dynamically holds together transcendence, historicity, and immanence within a Christian understanding of God. In this framework "human freedom and action within history is not considered autonomous and unlimited in what it can do and achieve – it is not on its own – but is perceived as restrained by and held accountable to that larger theological, ontological, and metaphysical foundation" (201).

Having made a case for this metaphysical framework, Reimer attends to a number of limitations he rightly sees in much of North American Mennonite life and theology. The most prominent are these:

1. *Contemporary Mennonites focus so much on history and ethics that they neglect the transcendent and sacramental.* Reimer affirms that the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship, and particularly the capacity to critique violent contemporary culture, is a gift that Anabaptist-Mennonites offer to the world. Indeed, "what Anabaptists did bring to classical orthodox Christianity was a heightened ethical consciousness that appeared to be missing in the ancient creeds" (393). But he is concerned that this prophetic critical stance be preserved without sacrificing the sacramental and mystical dimension of the Christian faith. Citing the work of David Tracy, Reimer suggests that Mennonites need to pay more attention to "the gracious and 'world affirming' aspects of experience" (204). This includes "a much greater recognition of the 'disclosure' and 'revelatory' nature of tradition and traditional classics" such as "texts, events, images, persons, rituals, and symbols – for the present situation" (197). A strong trinitarian theology can help Mennonites remember both the prophetic-transcendent and the sacramental-immanent dimensions of our experience of God.

2. *Mennonites may reflect too much historical and anthropological optimism.* Reimer notes that an emphasis on practical Christianity in connection with an assertion of free will and voluntarism led Mennonites to strive for perfection and a church "without spot or wrinkle." He believes however that ". . . the concept of the pure church is no longer adequate for our growing conviction that the church is not only a redeemed but also a redeeming community, in which individuals are not expected to be immediately perfect but are gradually nurtured to a fuller realization of God's intent" (519).

In addition, some Mennonite peace theologies seem too idealistic: "Our Mennonite peace theology, if it is not to deteriorate into a false romanticism, a kind of modern-day legacy of nineteenth-century liberalism, will need to deal seriously with . . . dark forces in the cosmos, in nature, and in our own psyches and communities" (489). To respond to innocent suffering, death, evil, and violence it is not enough to appeal to Jesus' example and the Sermon on the Mount: "Ultimately, we need a doctrine of God in which God himself is allowed to be radically free from our systems of morality and our vision of what God ought to be . . . even though we are called to be faithful to that christocentric ethic" (243). God need not be a pacifist, though we are called to express enemy love. A trinitarian doctrine of God can guide us: it is a framework which preserves the freedom of God while calling humans to an ethic based on the historical normativity of Jesus.

3. *Mennonites have an unwarranted prejudice against post-biblical doctrinal and ecclesial developments.* Reimer is particularly impatient with Mennonites who have a theologically and historically shallow view of early Christian doctrine, who make too sharp a division between Greek (ontological) and Judeo-Christian (historical) thought, and who view the institutionalization of the church symbolized by fourth-century "Constantinianism" too monolithically. He persuasively explains why he believes God was at work through classical theological imagination in the midst of social and political pressures in the formulations at Nicea and Chalcedon, arguing that theological orthodoxy and "Constantinianism" were not intrinsically linked. He notes that both Greek and Hebrew reasoning were fruitfully held together in theological development over the first four centuries, and suggests that Christian social ethics "is better served and more biblical when God's revelation in nature, human consciousness, and reason is seen not as alien to but consistent with

God's revelation in Christ, although it is only through the latter that the former is most clearly and fully understood" (476). And he wonders if Mennonites appreciate that it was because of missionary success that the early church grew incredibly, requiring new structures and forms of order. Nevertheless Reimer does support the radical Protestant critique of "Constantinianism" if narrowly defined as "political theology in which theology and politics are fused, or worse, where theology functions as an instrument of political ideology" (269).

4. *Mennonite ecclesiology does not adequately emphasize the universal church and the work of God outside the church.* Convinced that an adequate Christian vision of the church must not be limited to local expressions of the church, Reimer exhorts Mennonites to see themselves "as part of the church universal, which extends through time and throughout the whole world" (339). Many Mennonites tend to focus too much on local congregations, including in their method of interpreting Scripture, a method that often ignores interpretations developed through tradition. These "cannot be ignored for it is there that the Bible has come to its most normative expression in the ecumenical confessions of the early church"(352).

Mennonites both have "gifts" to offer the wider church (such as a heightened ethical consciousness and a peace witness) and much to learn from other Christians. Reimer considers the Pauline approach to "gifts" within the congregation as a model for approaching denominational "gifts" within the universal church. Though he does not provide a fully compelling case here, Reimer's desire to articulate a way of looking at the relation of the local church to the universal church which "allows for diversity without relativism, and unity without dogmatism" is commendable (551-52).

Reimer also worries that "The true theological significance of 'God-ordained' institutions . . . by which God preserves the world from total chaos and disintegration, is not adequately understood or acknowledged" in most Mennonite confessions of faith and systematic theologies (465). For when the church is understood in terms of a small group of believers rather than also in respect of its universal nature, the issue of how God governs or works in the world outside the church is not clearly addressed.

The theological claims encompassed by this volume should stimulate and deserve further conversation. Reimer's insistence that trinitarian theology

must ground Christian ethics should receive serious ongoing attention, especially among Mennonites. His argument that "God is not a pacifist" has already served as a catalyst for discussion among Mennonite scholars at the 2001 American Academy of Religion meeting. And his way of looking at the relationship of Mennonites to the universal church is both provocative and debatable. Reimer recognizes that he needs to explain further how he combines his confessional-dogmatic approach with his "Alexandrian leanings," and that nowhere in this volume does he engage "in a sustained, systematic treatment of Christian social ethics" (564). With this agenda and more, pastoral and professional theologians can look forward to the next twenty years of interaction with Reimer's theological imagination.

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Larry Towell, *The Mennonites*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2000.

During much of the twentieth century, and most notably since "the sixties," the visual theater performed by Mennonites-within-a-landscape or within-a-sunlit-space has provided North American photographers and painters with abundant material. Many groups of "Mennonites" on this continent, by the distinctiveness of their attire and their technology, their architecture and their communal habits, their history and their language, invite the public's eye. Many appear to be exotic; yet they are so close to home, neighbors to our urban mainstream. They seem to persist for decades on end, even centuries, in their visible display of an "otherness" with which cameras are keen to connect. Almost inevitably, partly because they adopt a lifestyle that the rest of us regard with some sense of nostalgia, even admiration, they tend to draw our cameras into a romantic response. We see their communalism, and the individual dramas that are nurtured within its framework, in ideal terms. Even photographers' attempts at detached documentary can not help, it seems, but turn into warm and appreciative applause.

Larry Towell's *The Mennonites* simultaneously disturbs and envigorates the corpus of photographic volumes about Mennonites in recent decades. His volume breaks the tone of expectation that we bring to books of photographs about an idyllic Mennonite life. In its combination of haunting dissonance and muted praise, it alters the very nature of a genre of books that we are used to enjoying for its apparently uncomplicated pleasures. This 280-page book, both sorrowful and reverent, resists and questions those pleasures and complacencies. Yet, in the end, though free of visual flattery in its treatment of this complex culture, Towell's book is astonishingly exhilarating and stimulating, engagingly compassionate and humanistic. We can debate the extent to which it is both weakened and strengthened by the audacious, even transgressive, sweep of its title. The book's visual kinship lies with the 1930s Depression-era work of American photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. Indeed, it draws on our conventional anticipation of pleasure in the emotionally powerful photographs that have come to define that decade in the United States.

Towell portrays and explores the lives of conservative farm people whose forebears began to leave Manitoba for Mexico and beyond in the 1920s,

when they opposed their children's being sent to government-regulated schools in Canada. Because of often grim economic conditions in Mexico, thousands have since made their way back to Canada as landless migrant workers to find jobs as laborers. It was in his own back yard in southern Ontario that Towell first encountered these people. As a prominent professional photographer, he found in them an extension of his broad interest in marginalized minorities – in El Salvador and Gaza, for example. The Mennonites from Mexico are, he stresses, a vulnerable and poorly-educated people cut off from the world, all too easily exploited by religious forces from within and by economic forces from without. Towell's closely observed visual studies – at once unruly and bleak, exuberant and spare – are the heart of the book. I saw a large number of these photographs for the first time in spring 2000 at the Bulger Gallery in Toronto, and some a year later at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa. It felt like Towell was doing something new and important within the quiet spaces of those galleries, and it feels as though he is doing the same with the 115 photographs – all black-and-white, many with the camera mingling at very close range with its sometimes decentered subject – in this book.

Most of the photographs were taken in Mennonite colonies in Mexico; thirty were taken in Canada. Mostly full-page, or running across two pages, they are from the start unnerving and disorienting. For example, where we would expect the title page, we are confronted instead by three young men in a bare room where the plaster is cracking on the wall behind. The trio, positioned to form a near triangle, look straight at us, all three brash and male behind self-congratulatory smirks, the closest one blowing a casual puff of cigarette smoke toward the camera. Overleaf, the balanced sweetness of a tousle-haired child asleep amongst large barrels of freshly picked cucumbers is set off balance by hands reaching in from a figure partly outside the frame. The next photograph shows a man, slightly out of focus toward the back of a room, seated at a table for a sparse meal, and bending across the table in front of him is a young woman holding a knife, the most brightly-lit object in the picture and close to its centre. Many of the photographs move outside the enclosure of rooms to show figures in a broader landscape, in the grids of farm fields, for example, or along dusty roads. They show an often restless yet often subdued world where a little happiness seems to cut through a shot

here and there, but where a sense of social curtness, eerily alienated aloneness even in company, even sexual violation, also are palpable though unspoken. Some of the adults have put their hats in front of their faces, or seem deliberately to avert their eyes from the camera. Some children seem fearful, tense. Some people, males – a boy with a cracked mirror near the front of the book, a man with an oval-framed mirror in the final picture – intently study their own faces and reflect them to us.

Towell's written text – filled with words that touch on the vile as well as the pious – is divided into eight parts. The words can be stark, but we come away feeling their warmth. Their evocative and poetic effect is profoundly moving. The text includes a preface, then a section on life in Ontario, then six on life in the Mexican colonies. One section includes a four-page interview with "Isaak Klassen" whose father, excommunicated from the church in Mexico for owning a vehicle, migrated with his family to Canada. Mostly, the writings come from Towell's "train of thought composed of flashbacks and fixations drawn from diary notes and the silt of memory." Towell, a published poet, provides a poignant text rich in metaphor that, with the pictures, contributes to a sense of elemental, mythic, and sometimes terrifying forces at play within this culture.

For all their allusion to despair, the images and the words – stunning evocations of what is sanctified and what is repressed – are a great photographer's act of homage to a people. The book grips us with the sweeping beauty of its language, and with brilliantly-realized visual moments that cast brief blessings on a culture estranged from the modern world and uneasy within itself. The 115 pictures stand like icons, endlessly suggestive in their captionless condition, marked only by the dates and titles that locate them according to colony or county in the illustrated list at the back of the book. As artifact – with its black covers and black-ribbon marker, with onion skin paper provided for the written text – this volume gestures toward a kind of holy script.

The Mennonites represents a project that is both deeply personal and highly professional. Towell reveals here why he belongs to Magnum, the agency that for decades has represented many of the world's leading documentary photographers and photo-journalists. His publisher, Phaidon, is renowned for the high standards of its presentation of art projects. But the aesthetics of

professional detachment and objective impersonality here blend with the subjective. This volume is a personal work of art by a man who became empathetically engaged with Old Colony Mennonites when he lived, travelled, and visited among them from 1990 to 1999, sleeping in their pick-up trucks or on cots otherwise taken by their children. Towell likes these people, whom he treats as trusting friends, and he pays close attention to them. By his eye and mind, hand and heart, he exalts and ennobles their dry world, and brings it with grace into our midst.

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From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding, edited by Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000.

From the Ground Up is a very well-written collection of sixteen essays which provides an overview and analysis of Mennonite activities in international peacebuilding. To aid the reader in understanding how Mennonite involvement in peacebuilding has matured, the book is divided into three sections which profile the context for Mennonite action; offer case studies from Africa, Northern Ireland, Latin America, and the Middle East written by practitioners who carried out the activities; and conclude with an analysis of these efforts by experienced independent conflict resolution professionals. The result is an effective overview of the scale, scope, and impact of Mennonite peacemaking.

An opening essay by historian Joseph S. Miller traces the evolution of Mennonite institutional engagement in peacemaking, showing the debate and discussion that surrounded the formation of Mennonite Conciliation Services, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and International Conciliation Services. The personal journey of two noted peace educators, John Paul Lederach in Central America and Ron Kraybill in South Africa, sheds light on how the influence of these pioneers has shaped Mennonite understandings of institutional

peacemaking. As Kraybill so aptly notes, "[p]eacebuilding as here described, is only possible, then, as it is grounded in a community of people who share a common vision of reality and who are prepared to work actively, indeed, self-sacrificially, to extend that reality to others" (44). This foundational approach is highly evident in the nine case studies that follow.

Case studies describing the work of Mennonite Central Committee in South Africa, Christian Peacemaker Teams in Haiti and Hebron, as well as other efforts by Mennonites in Northern Ireland, Colombia, Somalia, and Liberia illustrate the opportunity to promote peace while underscoring the limits of foreign intervention and the challenges of trying to promote peace in the context of bitter long-term conflicts. The ethical dilemmas raised when there are gross power imbalances between oppressed and oppressor are explored. While some authors rightfully acknowledge that our obligation as peacemakers is to be faithful and not necessarily successful, Joseph Liechty, in writing about conflict in Northern Ireland, confronts this passive approach: "I sometimes think I see among Mennonites inclinations more toward 'ineffectiveness is faithful' or 'effectiveness is unfaithful,' and I fear that many of us might fail to notice an opportunity to be effective if it jumped out and bit us" (85).

The critique offered in the last four chapters by non-Mennonite scholars demonstrates a great respect for Mennonite approaches to conflict and an acknowledgment that these approaches are rooted in a way of life based on community. Marc Gopin reserves the strongest criticism for Christian Peacemaker Teams, accusing them of being "decidedly partisan" (248). He also emphasizes the dilemma of standing with oppressed people today who might turn out to be the next oppressor of tomorrow.

Several characteristics of this book make it good reading. First, the contributing authors are a collection of "insiders" who have formulated the theory or engaged in the practice of peacemaking, and "outsiders" (non-Mennonite scholars) who provide an independent critique of these efforts. The result is a thoughtful but realistic apologetic for Mennonite approaches to peacebuilding. Second, the chapters tie together well: authors of the various chapters not only knew what other contributors had written, they also engaged their colleagues in an analysis and discussion. Third, the breadth of the case

studies gives an example of the suitability of foundational peacemaking principles in diverse settings. While individual techniques may not be transferrable across cultural borders, the underlying values and principles are.

This informative volume will be of special interest to conflict resolution practitioners, the academic peace studies community, and others concerned about matters of international peace and justice. It is highly recommended as a resource for anyone who wants to take a deeper look at the incredible ripple effect that Mennonite values and beliefs have had on peacemaking.

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Gerald W. Schlabach, *For the Joy Set Before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

"Why would a nice Mennonite boy like you be studying Augustine at Notre Dame?" So asked Professor Van Harvey when he learned Gerald Schlabach was focusing on Augustine for his doctoral work. Many of us might have related questions for Schlabach. Is he not aware that Augustine helped legitimate the employment of violence against enemies of both empire and church? That Augustine is responsible for a set of negative attitudes toward sexuality and the human body? That Augustine's strong rhetoric against Pelagius is partly responsible for causing traditions such as our Mennonite tradition to be labeled as Pelagian?

Schlabach is well aware of such questions. So, then, why Augustine? To answer that adequately is to discuss the book itself. It begins with a modern problematic, one certainly recognizable by Mennonites: Is it possible, in a theologically responsible way, to hold together self-love and self-denial? Many have argued it is not. Anders Nygren, the author of *Agape and Eros* thought that "self-love is the telltale sign in any Christian doctrine of love that is ultimately destined to undermine New Testament *agape*" (6). Augustine was one of the influential writers within the Christian tradition who Nygren said was guilty of mixing various forms of love – a clue, thought Schlabach, that Augustine's more integrated account of love might have something to offer.

Schlabach's project, stated in chapter one, is to employ Augustine's writings to combine a proper form of self-love with an "evangelical" self-denial, evangelical in that "it is only meaningful and proper in the light of the good that God intended and Christ proclaimed for human beings" (25-26). Chapter two discusses "the four loves" within Augustine's writings. For Augustine love of temporal goods, neighbors (including enemies), and self all have their relative importance when kept within the context of the ultimate love – the love of God. The next three chapters are on Augustine's conception, articulation, and practice of continence (self-denial or self-restraint). Let me mention three important points made in these chapters. First, contrary to popular impressions, for Augustine continence was not merely about sexuality but was a much broader concern. In fact, second and related, Augustine can easily be misunderstood if we think of continence only as a negative (i.e., self-denial). Properly understood, it is really about love, humility, patience, and even nonviolence. "Continence is [the] trustful, non-manipulative way of having a right relationship with the objects of one's love" (79). And third, Schlabach uses Augustine's own understanding of continence to argue that in encouraging the persecution and killing of enemies, Augustine was encouraging incontinent behavior, which is to say, wrong behavior by his own lights.

The final chapter, "Sustaining Self-Denial," is worth the price of the book. The seven theses and discussions presented there offer a rich feast of reflection. They amplify what Schlabach states earlier: "Self-denial is not a good in itself and self-sacrifice is not a freestanding duty. If Christ himself endured the cross for 'the joy that was set before him,' then even his own supremely sacrificial act looked with longing toward the *telos* of mutual love he had proclaimed as God's Reign. What makes joy in the mutual love that is 'set before us' something more than mere reciprocity is what Jesus Christ shows us about the way God creates and restores relations of mutual love: God has taken the first step, has loved and suffered first. Thus, all who seek mutual love in Christ-like ways will likewise be prepared to risk and to act first – not without hope nor altogether without thought of receiving love in return . . . but without any *guarantee* of receiving love in return" (17).

I don't know what Augustine scholars will make of this work. What I do know is that it is Mennonite theological engagement of another tradition at its best. Schlabach has not forgotten that he is Mennonite, yet through his

creative, careful engagement of Augustine he has retrieved riches not only for those Christians who call themselves Mennonite but for all Christians who take seriously our Lord's call to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow the One whose loving embrace includes us as it extends toward the redemption of the whole world.

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