Beyond Declension and Irony: Mennonite History as Community Studies

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During World War 2 a series of history booklets was published to "serve as texts for study by men in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps." The booklets, written by two men, Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith, had an instructive purpose:

> The story of Mennonite origins and development is an entrancing one. It is important for understanding Mennonite doctrine and life. Knowing the history of their church is sure to give members an appreciation of their heritage; it also gives a sense of direction as the church endeavors to live its life and give its witness in today's world.[1]

This paper explores American Mennonite historical interpretation with regard to that statement as it relates to pacifism. Historian Paul Toews has highlighted two dominant interpretive lenses in American Mennonite historiography: declension and irony. In noting these two approaches he also calls for this historiography to move beyond them.[2] Here, "declension" is taken to be the understanding of history that sees the present as decline vis-à-vis an authentic, almost pure origin; "irony" is taken as the view of history focused on the unintended consequences of decisions made, often by group leaders.

The narrative contained in Bender and Smith's "handbook" began with the birth of Christ, and described a rapidly expanding church over the centuries into Europe where it entered a steady decline into immorality and apostasy. Evil would control the church until the "great revival," the Protestant Reformation. The rise of Anabaptism is then traced through its Swiss and Dutch origins into North America. North America in this telling is the "center of gravity of world Mennonites . . . because the vigor and power of Mennonitism in America is still unimpaired, and most of all because it has kept a strong evangelical faith and with it the essence of the historic Mennonite heritage."[3] In America, exceptionalism, combined with a westering view of events, gave Mennonite historiography a distinctively American narrative. Here the Mennonite story in America begins as follows: "The early Mennonites in America, like the Puritans of New England, were a select people, selected on the basis of a tender conscience against war and religious intolerance." Their migrating westward across the continent is described as "almost always, like the westward course of empire in general, in a straight line towards the setting sun."[4] The Smith-Bender booklets would subsequently be used in church groups and youth meetings, with the result of popularizing a historical consciousness.[5]

Despite such triumphal, even apocryphal, pronouncements as offered in the CPS handbook history, Bender also articulated a view of history informed by declension. This was manifested in his address, "The Anabaptist Vision,"

and its establishment of a regulative, ahistorical, sixteenth-century break from history as the norm for the rest of Mennonitism to follow. In both his concern was the same, namely to support non-military engagement based upon the premises of Anabaptism, even though in reality a majority of Mennonite men chose some form of military service. What to do when expectations and reality diverge?

An early response was to craft histories informed by the declension approach, describing grand beginnings, a failed present, and a call to renewal. There are many examples of this interpretive model. John Howard Yoder, for one, appropriated it while a member of the Concern group in his critique of mid-twentieth century Mennonitism.[6] In these readings the present is an abysmal farce of an idealized — even romanticized — origins tale. In the process no credit is given to the negotiations people and groups make in their historical journeys through time and space.

The most significant history of American Mennonites is the "Mennonite Experience in America Series" (MEA), a series of books published from 1985 to 1996. By the mid-1980s the ahistorical declension of a previous generation was weakened, especially with the rise of the polygenesis theory of Anabaptist origins. As Paul Toews observed, "Now freed from the Mennonite version of the immaculate conception, historiography could turn in differing directions."[7] Toews explains how this book series replaced declension with irony, an interpretation that helps us understand the "recalcitrance of history."[8] Irony is kinder than declension, in that it recognizes both that history does not move in a straight line and that incongruity between intention and result may simply be paradox in the historical experience. Yet irony also "laments that history does not always achieve its fondest hopes."[9] Through the pages of the MEA series, while communities are present and at times observed, the weight is increasingly — as one moves through the series — on the role of large institutions and denominational leadership.

Examples of irony informing interpretations found in the MEA series include the following. Richard MacMaster describes church leaders failing to notice in their diatribes against "substantial wealth" that such wealth formed "a base for religious community."[10] Theron Schlabach demonstrates the irony of Mennonite youth delaying baptism, and therefore church membership, to the point of marriage so that pre-marital sex could not come under the sanction of church leadership.[11] James Juhnke, in the third volume, is most explicit on the

role of irony. Two central ironies inform his interpretation: (1) Mennonites came to America for religious freedom, material benefit, and community building; while in America they are opened up to pluralism and tolerance, and become a legitimate American religious group by maintaining their distinctive identity; (2) Running parallel to this is the irony of pursuing "biblical simplicity and nonconformity to the world" as the process creates a series of denominations complete with all the trappings of American Protestantism.[12] Finally, Paul Toews demonstrates that the Civilian Public Service had the ironical result of maintaining separation from the world by a more intimate relationship with the Federal Government.[13]

Declension and irony share one important assumption: understanding incongruity between ideals and realities is the Mennonite historical project. Yet local actors existing outside either worldview provide different sets of nuance. Without jettisoning these uses of history, adding a community studies approach to the palate of the historian may help explain those differences within the lived contexts of the actors themselves. Historical processes then need not be ignored or read backwards.

A community study is an approach to people groups first used by anthropologists and more recently adopted by historians.[14] Collectively they have had the positive impact of bringing religion into a historiography mostly empty of religion. For Mennonites this approach can bring some of the "give and take" of the world into a story told mainly about church. It can do this without recourse to a language of either painful declension or resigned irony.[15]

Bender and others can lament, perhaps properly, when half of the eligible men chose against conscientious objector status. To ignore the contingency of those choices is, nevertheless, unfair. This is not to say that pacifism becomes irrelevant; it still remains one of the few markers of Mennonitism — even if some choose to disregard it. It does indicate that there is more to being a Mennonite in America than being a pacifist, but that historically informed position must still be dealt with — whether in disregard or embrace. Consider the following two brief examples from Reedley, California in the mid-twentieth century, where local Mennonites dealt with what it meant to be a pacifist in wartime America and a warrior in a Mennonite community.

An example of pacifism existing as a non-normative factor in the same relative Mennonite community came out in the citizenship trial of Arthur Jost of Reedley in the early 1950s.[16] In his pursuit of American citizenship, Jost faced resistance from the court on account of being a conscientious objector,

a status which raised questions about his loyalty. Jost attempted to convince the court that nonresistance was an integral component of Mennonite teaching, and then subsequently he could be admitted to citizenship under the "substantial religious training" clause and could take the alternate citizenship oath for conscientious objectors. The relevant portion of the Internal Security Act of 1950 (Amended in 1952), quoting Senator McCarran, states that "there is a provision in the bill that a conscientious objector must show to the satisfaction of the naturalization court by clear and convincing evidence that he is opposed to the bearing of arms or the engaging in noncombatant service by reason of religious training and belief."[17] It should have been a simple task.

However, it became nearly impossible for Jost to demonstrate for the court that the Mennonite Brethren Church actually taught nonresistance and the refusal to bear arms. Evidence presented *against* the claim that the MB Church taught refusal to bear arms and noncombatant service was compelling as testimony from Mennonite Brethren ministers was taken into account. For example, Rev. Dan Friesen of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Fresno stated that "there is nothing in the Mennonite creed or teaching to prevent one from wearing the uniform of the Armed Forces, and that the Mennonites as an organization do not teach its members that they should refrain from performing noncombatant service in the Armed Forces."[18] Mennonite ministers of the area gave conflicting testimony, and that was the most damaging piece of evidence against Jost's petition for citizenship.

Another example of the struggle over pacifism is found in the First Mennonite Church of Reedley, a General Conference church. Within a week of Pearl Harbor, First Mennonite sent a letter to the city council, stating the church would be willing to support civil defense, ask congregants to cease speaking German, and suspend the German language in church indefinitely.[19] War bonds were largely ignored until it became prudent in order to avoid government investigation, and then only bare minimums were purchased.[20] In these seemingly innocuous examples a Mennonite congregation is negotiating and adapting to the expectations of the larger society while expressing their principle of nonresistance. In fact, of the three main draft classifications, 19 members served as 1-O in CPS camps, 29 in either 1-A or 1-A-O, and at least seven enlisted.[21] No official reaction or sanction is recorded against those who chose 1-A or 1-A-O, but many non 1-O's reported an unofficial "shunning" by congregants, though no one admitted to doing the shunning.[22]

The complex struggle for understanding pacifism and negotiating its place in the larger society is found in this testimony of why one member served as 1-A:

> Well, I felt I owed it to the soldiers for what they were doing for me. *WHAT WERE THEY DOING FOR YOU?* They were doing something the government demanded. I felt funny saying, "You have no conscience; so you can get yourself shot. I have a conscience so I won't." . . . Well, it was like: there was evil. Hitler exists and others are fighting him. I'm benefiting from their sacrifice. So it made me feel guilty. . . . In the final analysis it is more important to stand up for your convictions than to be overrun by evil.[23]

After the war he became disillusioned, yet kept the same individualistic position as the basis of processing one's response to war:

> I'm now pro-draft resistance. But not just because the church is, rather on the basis of what the person believes. A person must formulate his own peace witness and show it in the way he likes.[24]

Religion and Mennonitism do not appear in any aspect of his developing convictions regarding military service or draft resistance.

Mennonite history is a set of competing narratives seeking to modify, influence, and even control the construction of American Mennonite identity. A community study provides alternative readings of Mennonite history that work with theological ideals, institutional development, and the local context. Here choices are given space where they need not be framed as "failure" or "unintended." Where earlier interpretations of history stressed comparison of the present with some point in the past — usually in sixteenth-century origins — community studies explores the history of a particular people in a particular place on its own terms. What is significant about exploring pacifism in central California are the varieties of understandings of what it means to be a Mennonite. Arthur Jost had difficulty in his quest for citizenship because area ministers did not agree on the role of nonresistance in Mennonite teaching. Reedley Mennonites were split on the importance of pacifism, but perhaps more important was their ability to keep the church from breaking apart. The Mennonite soldier interviewed had a fluid understanding of his identity as a pacifist and warrior, and in both instances he upheld individual choice over Mennonite religious teaching.

Exploring pacifism with community studies thus begs other factors to come into view. In central California, for example, there are Mennonite churches that actively cultivate Mennonite identity through the publication of "History of Mennonites" pamphlets for the neighborhood; others observe the January anniversary of the birth of Anabaptism. These groups tend to be in cities like Los Angeles and Fresno, and suffer deeper identity questions when the racial and ethnic makeup of their neighborhoods shifts. Some Mennonite groups in the valley stood at the gates to keep eastern MCC labor supporters out, yet still considered it important to provide their share of material support to, and regularly participate in, the annual MCC Relief Sale. In this geographic region, Mennonitism in the mid-twentieth century was expressed as much with a belief in non-resistant communitarian ideals as with an individualistic evangelical pietism where BIOLA and Billy Graham did more for Mennonite development than Menno, Bender, or Yoder did.

Is all this a cautionary tale of California Mennonites, living by the setting sun, severed from the past with only a sixteenth-century Anabaptist shaking his finger to look at? Is all this the lamentable result of people caught in the tide of historical process, where the best intentions of thoughtful leaders and helpful institutions are floating far from the shores of intent? Perhaps it is all this, but also it is the result of a community of people adapting to a changing pluralistic society to which they desire to be contributing members.

Notes

[1] Paul Erb, "Preface," *Mennonites and Their Heritage: A Handbook of Mennonite History and Beliefs* (1942, 1944), ed. Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1964), 3.
[2] Paul Toews, "The American Mennonite Search for a Usable Past: From the Declensive to the Ironic Interpretation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73.3 (July 1999): 470-84.
[3] Bender and Smith, *Mennonites and Their Heritage*, 77.
[4] *Ibid.*, 81, 94.
[5] Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, *Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975).
[6] John Howard Yoder, "The Anabaptist Dissent: The Logic of the Place of the Disciple in Society," *Concern*, No. 1, June 1954; John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970); John Howard Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," *Concern*, No. 18, July 1971.

[7] Paul Toews, "The American Mennonite Search for a Usable Past," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73.3 (July 1999): 481.
[8] *Ibid*., 483.
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] Richard MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, MEA volume 1 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1985), 110, 136.
[11] Theron Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America*, MEA volume 2 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1988), 83.
[12] James Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America 1890-1930*, MEA volume 3 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1989), 55, 300.
[13] Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*, MEA volume 4 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1996), 129ff.
[14] Valerie J. Matsumoto, *Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919-1982* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Marilynn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[15] Although outside the geographic focus of this study, see Royden K. Loewen's *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
[16] For a full account of the trial see Silas Langley. "Conscientious Objection in the United States: Individual or Corporate? The Case of *Arthur Jost* v. *The United States*, 1954. *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69.4 (October 1995): 37-52.
[17] 4th Civil No. 4400 - In District Court of Appeal 4th Appellate District. *Arthur Jost vs. United States of America*. Judge, Hon. Arthur C. Shepard [1952?]. Arthur Jost Papers, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA. Box M24, File: Legal Documents: Fourth Appellate District, State of California Aug. 1952-May 1953, 2.
[18] *Ibid*., 8-12.
[19] Dan Forsyth, "Motivational Bases for Conformity to Religious Norms" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1983), 90.
[20] *Ibid.*, 91. Forsyth is an anthropologist, and the work cited is a field study where the informants are anonymous.
[21] 1-A is for persons who did not object to direct participation in the war-regular military duty; 1-A-O is military service as noncombatant.
[22] Forsyth, 91-95.
[23] *Ibid*., 107-108.
[24] *Ibid*.