(Re)Figuring Tradition

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Introduction

Developing a theology and hermeneutics of tradition comprises one crucial aspect of the ongoing emergence of explicit, more comprehensive theological articulation reflecting the implicit, lived theology of Anabaptist-Mennonite communities.[1] The notion of tradition will continue to present a particular challenge in the postmodern context and in light of socio-cultural and historiographic shifts among Mennonites.

The full chapter of my dissertation, from which this presentation is excerpted, surveys the definition and function of tradition[2] in recent Anabaptist-Mennonite theology by treating the work of four figures representing a range of theological approaches in the US context: J. Denny Weaver, Thomas Finger, Gordon Kaufman, and Duane Friesen.[3] Here I will sketch their approaches and present a commentary on their contribution to a hermeneutics of tradition in Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. I conclude by suggesting the fruitfulness of an explicitly hermeneutical approach to the notion of tradition and its function in theologizing by engaging the interpretation theory of Paul Ricoeur.

Tradition in Contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology

Summary of Figures

Denny Weaver represents a narrative theology approach in which the theological task focuses on Christian self-description and the inner logic of the tradition. A tradition may be identified by its regulative principles, a set of interdependent beliefs structuring a way of life.[4] He delineates three regulative principles of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition: the normativity of Jesus; peace (including nonviolent love); and community as alternative society.[5] All of these are grounded in the normative biblical narrative of Jesus. Plurality in the tradition, both past and present, is understood as various expressions of these same regulative principles.

Thomas Finger views the primary theological task as one of synthesis: harmonizing clashing assumptions, smoothing out paradoxes, refining assertions; his is a synthesizing or integrating approach.[6] Finger summarizes Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as a matter of discipleship, which he describes as living in accordance with Jesus' teaching and example (including nonviolent love) in close fellowship with other Christians.[7] Yet this tradition is open to revision, allowing for the incorporation of new themes.[8] His own work reflects a real freedom in combining an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective with aspects drawn from other Christian traditions.

Gordon Kaufman's imaginative constructive approach construes the theological task as ascertaining which inherited beliefs and concepts are still viable and reconstructing them so they may continue to serve human intellectual and religious needs.[9] This critical reconstruction is governed by the pragmatic

criterion of humanization, and the ability of the tradition to orient life in the current context in light of contemporary knowledge.[10] For Kaufman, Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition continues to be characterized by four things: an emphasis on the paradigmatic example of Jesus including his ethic of nonresistant and self-sacrificial love; a community committed to reconciliation; a witness of the whole of life; and the primacy of life over belief.[11]

Duane Friesen's theology-of-culture approach argues that Christian traditions, including Anabaptist-Mennonitism, are best understood as presenting various "cultural visions" which orient the lives of their participants.[12] Constructive interpretation of the vision and the Christ at its center must empower participants to make sense of existence and must orient life fruitfully in the present.[13] Friesen argues the "dual citizenship" characterizing his theology of culture reflects three definitive aspects of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition: an alternative cultural vision; this vision's embodiment in a community for the world; and this community's being oriented by Jesus and his radical discipleship, the heart of which is nonviolent love.[14]

Commentary on Figures

First, all four thinkers construe the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as primarily emphasizing a way of life or an orientation to life with significant ethical implications. And all describe the basic outlines of this orientation and ethic in similar terms: a voluntary alternative community, following the radical discipleship exemplified by Jesus, including nonviolent love of neighbor and enemy. Consequently, a hermeneutics of tradition for this community must do justice to this emphasis on lived faith and its radical ethic.

Second, Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is normed by something that stretches beyond itself. All but Kaufman explicitly link the life-orientation and ethical emphasis to the Believers' Church, as a way of tracing the relation of Anabaptism to the broader history of the church. All four consider Jesus and the community following him as paradigmatic of this orientation. Hence, for all, any Christian tradition, including Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, is normed by something else. But here differences emerge. Weaver and Finger argue without apparent qualification that the Christ event witnessed to in scripture functions normatively, and they begin considering the hermeneutical issues involved in taking a text as a norm. Kaufman and Friesen present a pragmatic criterion to

which all else is subject. Scripture retains a role for both (more prominently for Friesen), because the constructive interpretation of the Christ event which it contains can fulfill the requirement of providing a reasonable and fruitful life orientation. Thus, it seems that an Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics of tradition must address the question of norms, including the complex relation of tradition to scripture and the tradition's ability to orient life fruitfully in the present.

Third, tradition as both chosen and given. In keeping with the voluntarism of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, all in some measure emphasize the importance of choice in following the life orientation of any tradition. Yet all four figures also recognize tradition as a given source to some degree; we are inextricably located within historical traditions, we bring tradition-shaped perspectives to our interpretation of human existence. All reflect an awareness of historicity, something essential for adequate discussion of the way traditions function.

Fourth, for all, the understanding of the tradition and the articulation of its identity is impacted by the socio-cultural shifts which have occurred among many Anabaptist-Mennonites in the past century. Here I mean specifically the move from rural enclaves of relatively homogenous communities to urbanized life, and increasing integration into the broader, diverse society. Kaufman and Friesen both discuss the reality of living as part of multiple communities. Both ground a positive view of cultural engagement in an understanding of the radical ethics of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition; so engagement is not a shift away from but a continuation of the tradition and its basic tenets. In doing so, Friesen retains the language of alternative community, while Kaufman's work avoids any oppositional impressions, employing the notion of evolutionary historical trajectories. Finger's synthetic approach surely results from his engagement with multiple communities, reflecting his involvement in the ecumenical movement. He rightfully calls attention to the fact that traditions develop in dialogue with other traditions. His awareness of multiple communities and willingness to borrow from them is not in doubt. Less clear is whether this includes the recognition of actual belonging to, versus simply dialoguing with and borrowing from, multiple communities (religious or otherwise). Weaver, in response to identity confusion resulting from socio-cultural shifts and uncritical acceptance of theologies from other traditions, calls for the development of an explicit Anabaptist-Mennonite theology to replace the lost socio-cultural boundary markers. Explicit theological articulation consistent with the community's implicit theology is indeed a

necessity, but it can never fully take the place of those identity markers. Here Friesen's focal practices provide a much needed corrective.

In fact, of all the thinkers, Friesen arguably presents the most complete description of tradition as it functions in the lives of its participants, through his engagement with cultural anthropology. His discussion of focal practices communicates a lived faith and attends more explicitly to how the process of "traditioning" itself takes place. Surely this issue is at the heart of those raised by socio-cultural shifts: How the traditioning process occurs among participants of multiple communities and in diverse contexts. How might an explicit hermeneutics of tradition help provide a construct for understanding and attending to "traditioning" in these settings?

Fifth, for all four thinkers, the understanding of the tradition and articulation of its identity is impacted by the historiographic shift from monogenesis to polygenesis, the resultant demise of Harold Bender's functionally normative Anabaptist Vision, and the consequent heightened recognition of historical and contemporary plurality. All four embrace this reality, though notable by its absence is any real discussion of the attendant ambiguity. Kaufman is least concerned to engage Bender's vision or these changes explicitly, but his understanding of historicity and his notion of evolutionary historical trajectories presents the most radical application of what is at issue in these shifts. Friesen engages Bender critically, distancing his culturally engaged understanding of the tradition from the essentialism and separatism he associates with Bender's model. Friesen's theology of culture includes aspects of a hermeneutics of tradition which addresses this multiplicity through discussion of overlapping communities reflecting various cultural visions. Both Finger and Weaver retain Bender's vision of an Anabaptist essence as an appropriate description of the tradition. Finger does so without apparent qualification, while Weaver reframes Bender's elements as regulative principles but continues to use "core" and "essence" language. Thus, the question of making theological sense of the historical and contemporary plurality within the tradition persists. How can one develop an understanding of tradition which both reflects its plurality and fluidity and communicates its recognizable identity?

The work of these four figures together points towards aspects of an Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutics of tradition. Such a hermeneutics must reflect the tradition's emphasis on a lived faith and radical ethic, and an awareness of human historicity and volition (tradition as both "given" and chosen). It

must reflect the plurality and fluidity of the tradition while communicating its recognizable identity. It must address the question of norms, including the complex relation of tradition to scripture and tradition's ability to orient life fruitfully in the present. It entails a robust understanding of tradition as including both explicit theological articulation and visible, communal, focal practices. It must account for how the traditioning process occurs among its members, who are themselves participants in multiple communities and diverse contexts.

Paul Ricoeur's Interpretation Theory and a Hermeneutics of Tradition

Paul Ricoeur's work may assist us in developing a more explicit, fully-orbed hermeneutics of tradition in Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. Three concepts are central: the productivity of "distanciation," the understanding-explanation dialectic, and the world of the text. Ricoeur develops a dialectic of understanding and explanation as central to his text-focused interpretive theory. He links the necessary "detour" through explanation to an assertion of the productivity of distanciation in understanding. The interpreter encounters the "world" or way of being-in-the-world projected by the text. Distance from the original author, context, and audience makes possible a new event of meaning in the interpreter's encounter with the world projected by the text. This distance also allows for a critical examination of the interpreter's assumptions and of the text's structure, content, and production. These three focal concepts have significant implications for a hermeneutics of tradition, for Ricoeur views text interpretation as the paradigm for the human encounter of historical traditions.[15]

The productivity of distanciation. At the heart of the productivity of distanciation lies the dialectic of participatory belonging to, and alienating distance from, tradition. Given this dialectic, we never begin the interpretive process from completely outside the circle. We both belong to tradition and must understand and appropriate it through interpretation of its "texts" (broadly construed) that lie at a distance from us. Understanding and appropriating the heritage entails a detour through the interpretation of its "signs." In this way, the interpretive task consists in making distanciation productive. In fact, Ricoeur argues, without this distanciation "we would never become conscious of belonging to a world, [or] a culture, [or] a tradition."[16] The hermeneutical reflection corresponding to distanciation "is the critical moment, originally bound to the consciousness of belonging-to, that confers its properly historical

character on this consciousness."[17] This properly character consists in a dialectic of the efficacy of the past we undergo and the reception of the past we bring about. Ricoeur employs the term "traditionality" to describe this dialectic of transmission, consisting of both sedimentation and innovation. Traditionality "signifies the temporal distance separating us from the past is not a dead interval but a transmission that is generative of meaning. Before being an inert deposit, tradition is an operation that can only make sense dialectically through the exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present."[18]

The understanding-explanation dialectic. Interpretation entails a dialectic of understanding and explanation, which includes both a hermeneutics of retrieval and a (self-) critical hermeneutics of suspicion. Just as deconstruction of the illusions of the subject emerge as central to self-understanding in front of the text, so understanding and appropriation of a tradition and its heritage must include a detour through critique and critical explanation. For, as David Tracy observes, there are no innocent traditions.[19] Ricoeur's critique of the self-positing, autonomous ego may be extended to authoritarian understandings of tradition. A tradition must be tested, for it presents an order of meaning entailing truth claims. The recourse to explanatory procedures is necessary, for meaning is inseparable from truth, and such presumptions of truth must, for Ricoeur, appeal to the tribunal of reason. A hermeneutics of tradition must include the critical moment.[20]

The world of the text. The text's projection of a world and possibilities for being-in-the-world may be seen as analogous to the way of being circumscribed by a tradition. Indeed, for Ricoeur texts are principal objectifications of historical traditions and thus the paradigm for understanding the past. Tradition requires the continual interpretation of its "deposit": "our 'heritage' is not a sealed package we pass from hand to hand, without ever opening, but rather a treasure from which we draw by the handful and which by this very act is replenished. Every tradition lives by the grace of interpretation, and it is at this price that it continues, that is, remains."[21] Here the dialectic of the efficacy of the past we undergo and the reception of the past we bring about re-emerges. As interpreters of a tradition we are both heirs and innovators, "receiving" its contents as transmitted by a previous chain of interpreters, and fully making meaning of it only as we concretize a present understanding that culminates in appropriation.[22] The "configuration" of the "text" of tradition becomes "refiguration" in effective action, instructed

by the "works" handed down. The text of tradition functions as a medium through which self-understanding emerges, and through which a possible world and ways of being-in-the-world are disclosed. As with literary texts, in the appropriation of tradition, interpretation becomes event.

Conclusion

I would suggest that Ricoeur's first two notions — the productivity of distanciation with its dialectic of participatory belonging to and alienating distance from tradition, and the understanding-explanation dialectic including a hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion — help address the problematic of tradition in the postmodern setting. This problematic is reflected in several aspects of the trajectories for a hermeneutics of tradition I sketched drawing on the four figures: an awareness of human historicity; traditions as both given and chosen; the plurality and fluidity yet recognizable identity of traditions; the difficult and complex questions surrounding norms and, by implication, authority. Ricoeur can help us better account for the dialectical exchange of interpreted past and interpreting present as it shapes Anabaptist-Mennonite theologizing. This dialectic must be understood to span the past nearly 500 years rather than leapfrogging back and forth between the twentieth or twenty-first centuries and the sixteenth. The paired hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion assist in accounting for the ambiguity of our tradition as well. With this pairing there is room both to affirm the truth about God, humanity, and the gospel disclosed through this tradition, and to critique the ways it has obscured such truth through the machinations of power, coercion, and domination, and through sins of commission and omission.

The third notion — of a text projecting a world or way of being-in-the-world which interpreters help complete and appropriate — seems particularly suited to an understanding of tradition in Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. For it appears to provide a model allowing for the emphasis on lived faith and a radical ethic central to the self-understanding of those in the tradition. The "text" of tradition discloses a possible world and ways of being-in-the-world, but it can only do so in the act of interpretation, which culminates in appropriation at the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the interpreter.

The fruitfulness of this hermeneutical model for thinking about the traditioning process, the plurality, fluidity, and recognizable identity of tradition, and its role in theologizing deserves further exploration. An adequate

hermeneutics of tradition must reflect the historical and contemporary pluralism of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, the primacy of faith as a way of life in this tradition, and the dynamic, negotiated nature of the definition and function of historical traditions generally. Such a hermeneutics constitutes an important aspect of the methodological issues that will continue to face Anabaptist-Mennonite theology.

Notes

[1] The Council of Mennonite Seminaries convened its first consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite theology in 1969 for the purpose of stimulating theological conversation in relationship to the larger theological task; see A. J. Klassen, ed., *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology* (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970). A consultation on hermeneutics and systematic theology convened by The Institute of Mennonite Studies in Elkhart, in 1983 addressed whether systematic theologies in Mennonite perspectives are possible or desirable, and what shape they might take; see Willard Swartley, ed., *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers, no. 7 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984). Since 1983, *The Conrad Grebel Review* has provided a primary forum for this ongoing discussion. See also Ben C. Ollenburger, ed., *So Wide a Sea: Essays On Biblical and Systematic Theology*, Text-Reader Series, vol. 4 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991); Calvin Wall Redekop, ed., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Institute for Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1988), Part 1.

[2] Sandra Schneider offers three meanings of tradition in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 72: "Tradition, as the *foundational gift* out of which the Church's experience unfolds throughout history, is the Holy Spirit who is the presence of the risen Jesus making the Church the Body of Christ. Tradition, as *content*, is the sum total of appropriated and transmitted Christian experience, out of which Christians throughout history select the material for renewed synthesis of the faith. Tradition refers also to the *mode* by which that content is made available to successive generations of believers, the way in which the traditioning of the faith is carried on throughout history." This study is concerned with the second and third meanings.

[3] Some voices important to the ongoing discussion are not represented. An embodied feminist voice is one such absence. This is not because women have nothing to say about Mennonite theologizing and Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, as attested to by the Anabaptist Women Doing Theology Conferences (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, scheduled 2003), the published conference papers (see *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10, 14, 19 and *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65 and other work by women such as Nadine Pence Frantz, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Lydia Harder, Ruth Krall, Melanie May. Unfortunately, none has produced substantial works usable within the requirements of this study — American, Mennonite, and more traditionally theological. The same may be said, to the best of my knowledge, of racial and ethnic minority

voices. My requirement of American Mennonite scholars addressing the American Mennonite scene has eliminated Brethren and other Anabaptist-related voices (notably that of Scott Holland), and Canadian voices although significant dialogue occurs binationally and in the forum of the Canadian Mennonite journal, *The Conrad Grebel Review*. Here the most glaring absence is surely the noteworthy and considerable work of A. James Reimer.

[4] J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 121.

[5] J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonite Theological Self-Understanding: A Response to A. James Reimer," in *Mennonite Identity*, ed. Redekop, 58. Weaver presents summaries of this theological outlook in several other works; see *Becoming Anabaptist*, 129-41; "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986): 162-82; "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 6 (Spring 1988): 126-31.

[6] Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985-1989), I:9, 31.

[7] Thomas N. Finger, "The Way to Nicea: Reflections from a Mennonite Perspective," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 3 (Fall 1985): 231; "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible from a Mennonite Perspective?" in *Explorations*, ed. Swartley, 42.

[8] Thomas N. Finger, "Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17 (Spring 1999): 61-65.

[9] Gordon D. Kaufman, *God—Mystery—Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 22.

[10] Gordon D. Kaufman, "Doing Theology from a Liberal Point of View," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComisky (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 398-99.

[11] See Gordon D. Kaufman, "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective," in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1996), 9, 17; "My Life and My Theological Reflection: Two Themes," *dialog* 40 (Spring 2001): 50, 58; "Mennonite Peace Theology in a Religiously Plural World," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 14 (Winter 1996): 33-34, 47.

[12] Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 15-16, 24-25.

[13] Duane K. Friesen, "A Critical Analysis of Narrative Ethics," in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honor of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite Bible College Publications, 1990), 235.

[14] Duane K. Friesen, "An Anabaptist Theology of Culture for a New Century," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 13 (Winter 1995): 36-37, 49; *Artists, Citizens*, 24, 64.

[15] See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976) and *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Part II — "Studies in the Theory of Interpretation."

[16] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 107.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), III:221.
[19] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 37.
[20] See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, III:222-27; "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology" and "Appropriation" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 63-100 and 182-93.
[21] Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 27.
[22] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, III:221-22.