Negotiating Democracy: Mennonite Reflections
A Reply to Respondents

Ted Grimsrud

I

My essay, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," originated as a public lecture given in June 2003 to a MennoNeighbors theology forum in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The lecture, entitled "Anabaptist Faith and the Wars of America," sought to respond to the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq. Various responses, friendly and not-so-friendly, helped me develop the ideas further and recast the essay as a more general meditation on Mennonites and democracy.[1]

Perhaps the war in Iraq remains a useful case for laying out the issues I am most concerned with. How do we as Anabaptist Christians in North America respond to this war? Many US Mennonites, it would appear, implicitly support it – or at least support the people directly responsible for it. I am not aware of hard data, but most observers seem to have the clear impression that many Mennonites and Amish, especially in the "battleground states" of Ohio and Pennsylvania, strongly supported the Bush/Cheney ticket in the 2004 election. This impression raises a significant question: What do we make of the support (supposedly) peace-loving Mennonites would give to a war-initiating president?

Many more US (and probably Canadian) Mennonites remain aloof concerning the war. Either they cannot be bothered with "political" issues or they believe they should not be distracted from "kingdom work" by the things of this world and its wars and rumors of wars. However, there are also many of us, perhaps especially clustered around our church colleges and seminaries and in the Mennonite urban diaspora, who overtly oppose the war.

Drawing upon Ted Koontz's *MQR* essay that speaks directly to this issue, "Thinking Theologically About War Against Iraq,"[2] we may identify two options for Mennonite war opponents. The first option is to enter the public discussion on the terms of public policy makers and secular society in general, more or less using lowest common denominator vocabulary, speaking pragmatically in light of universally accepted humanitarian concerns and of

genuine national interest. With this approach, we would *avoid* speaking out of our specific, faith-based Christological convictions, trying to communicate more broadly in public, "secular" language.[3] The second option is to speak overtly from our specific religious convictions, what Koontz calls our "first language" of Anabaptist/Mennonite Christian pacifism. If we choose this option, we must – in Koontz's argument – recognize the limitations to the relevance of this language. We simply will not be understandable or persuasive to public policy makers, because this first language is not very accessible to those in the "second language" realm of the public policy arena in a secular society. So, in this option, we focus as much on remaining clear among ourselves about our pacifism (and helping to keep it alive) and its christological bases as on trying directly to influence public policy.

I find neither option satisfactory. One problem with the first option is that when we speak strictly in terms of universal, broadly understandable pragmatic and humanitarian concerns, we will likely not be speaking and acting out of our deepest convictions. This is my biggest issue with Scott Holland's proposal. I share his concern that our Anabaptist communities *not* "become yet one more sectarian, sacred reservation of spirit in a blessed fallen world" – and that we engage fully in seeking the *social* good for the entire world. Yet I fear that with his public ethics/personal morality split, Holland cuts Anabaptists off from the very heart of their best contribution to the public conversation and from the passion of heart he rightly values so highly. Nor, if we speak only in Holland's "public language," will we likely contribute much to the broader discussion, because we will not be adding anything to it from our unique perspective and tradition. I believe that seeing the world through Christian pacifist lenses allows us to see some things others do not normally see. Our special insights may be contributed as angles of view that would otherwise not likely be entered into the conversation.

The problem with option two is that we *ourselves* are putting limits on the relevance of our voice. While neither Peter Dula nor Matt Hamsher articulates his concern in ways that fully fit within this option, I fear that each, with his pessimism about civic society and the view of Liberalism as *the* dominant public philosophy (unlike Jeffrey Stout in *Democracy and Tradition*[4], who sees Liberalism as only one of *many* democratic voices in the conversation), comes too close to this unwarranted *self*-limitation. The second

option may end up being a form of self-censorship wherein we decide ahead of time that our voice will not be offered to the wider conversation. As well, by limiting in effect the relevance of our Christian pacifist convictions and perceptions, we are granting a great deal of autonomy from God (as we perceive God) to the public realm.

In light of these problems, I am trying to work at another way of thinking about opposing the war in Iraq or, more generally, about participating in our nation's public policy conversations. I want to argue for seeking to do all we can to influence US public policy in light of our ethical convictions while remaining consistent with our identity as Anabaptist Christians.

What are the central elements of this identity? In my July 2004 essay I summarize four important distinctives that characterized the broad sweep of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement as a unique embodiment of Christian faith: (1) the establishment of a church free from state control; (2) the refusal to fight in wars; (3) the creation of communities structured around upside-down social power; and (4) the practice of an alternative economics characterized by a non-acquisitive spirit. In response to Jeremy Bergen's questioning whether these distinctives provide "an adequate way of leveraging an Anabaptist core," I would point out that I am careful to frame my retrieval as an attempt to "draw upon the radicality of that movement for help in negotiating our current citizenship challenges"[5] – not to provide an objective, scientifically historical, merely descriptive account of the Anabaptist movement on its own terms. I am approaching that movement in an analogous way to how I approach the Bible – not as an inert historical object but as a story in which I continue to participate, asking what is most useful in it for my own faithfulness and that of my present-day community.

The Anabaptists formulated and articulated their core convictions as part of their sense of calling to be salt and light, contributing to the transformation of a world that in so many ways embodied rebelliousness against the rule of Jesus Christ. They understood their witness as being "for the nations," even in spite of the nations' hostility. Due to that hostility, the extent and effectiveness of their witness was severely limited. Anabaptists quickly bumped up against limits, facing severe persecution from the very start in early 1525 and lasting most of the rest of the sixteenth century and beyond. They were executed by the score, forced underground and into exile,

their transformative spirit soon reoriented toward a spirit of seeking simply to survive and find the few European pockets of toleration.

However, in the early twenty-first century context in North America we do not face the same limits imposed upon the early Anabaptists. We have both much greater potential for having a voice in shaping our nation's public policies and much greater safety in expressing our (perhaps) counter-cultural convictions. So, when we hear international voices urging us to do what we can to curb the violence of the US Empire, we cannot appeal to Anabaptist-like persecution or Soviet-like impregnable governmental leaders. Our main limitation, at least in regard to making an effort to join the public conversation if not in regard to our effectiveness, appears to come from our own self-imposed restraint.

Is it possible, contrary to the intimations of Koontz and others (most famously Stanley Hauerwas), to maintain our Anabaptist identity while involving ourselves in shaping public policies? According to Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*, the US democratic tradition says, Yes, we Anabaptist Christians may participate in public policy conversations *as* Anabaptist Christians – adding our distinctive voices to the discernment processes and remaining true to the most central elements of our identity. However, some of us are not so sure. Are we keeping faith with the world's victims of our nation's Empire Story, if we limit our own participation in the conversation prior to facing the kinds of externally imposed restrictions that limited our forebears? Positing too strong a sense of *incommensurability* between our convictions and the "outside world" (as do Koontz and Hauerwas, in my mind[6]) due to *our* assumptions about what "they" can understand, about the limits to the applicability of our convictions, and about the corrupting nature of our so-called "liberal society" places too many self-imposed limits on our participation.

I find it helpful to make a rudimentary distinction in thinking about our context in the United States between the "two Americas" I discuss in the essay – the Democracy Story and the Empire Story.[7] There *is* incommensurability between our Anabaptist faith and faith in the Empire.[8] However, unlike Koontz, I do not think of it in terms of Christians versus non-Christians. This split, as seems especially obvious since the rise of the Christian right, divides Christians from Christians.[9] As well, we all surely know of, even work side-by-side with, people who share our deepest convictions concerning peace and opposition to war but do *not* identify themselves as Christians.

Admittedly, elements of the practice of democracy in the United States, and beliefs about democracy, are in tension with Anabaptist faith. However, the traditions, practices, and ideals of people who most fully embody the Democracy Story may on the most part be affirmed as compatible with our convictions. When I think of the Democracy Story, I think most of all of the great dissenters – Tom Paine, Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Jane Addams. Randolph Bourne, Eugene Debs, Fighting Bob LaFollette, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Noam Chomsky, Wendell Berry, Jim Wallis, Terry Tempest Williams, and on and on.[10] And I could also use synonyms for the Democracy Story, such as Civil Rights Story, Anti-War Story, Religious Freedom Story, Labor Rights Story, etc. That is, perhaps the term "democracy" itself requires careful thought. I tend to think of "democracy" mostly in light of what John Howard Yoder called "the rule of Paul."[11] By that he meant the full participation in decision-making and discernment processes of all people within the community – and the commitment to foster this participation and to resist efforts to limit it. To me, "democracy" in this sense is very Christian, very Anabaptist. Many other sources also flow into American democratic ideals, but part of how American democracy is supposed to work (as Stout so well articulates) is that all of us who have a voice should be using it.

II

All the respondents to my essay have made most helpful contributions to continuing the discussion. Jeremy Bergen captures very well my concern when he says I am proposing that faithfulness to the Anabaptist Story obligates its participants to: (1) engage in the pursuit of the common good, (2) reject and resist oppressive configurations of worldly power, (3) make practical, though not ultimate, use of democratic institutions for this end, and (4) continually discern how our convictions and practices, especially our peace position, can be an effective witness in the world. I especially appreciate Bergen's framing this discussion more overtly in doctrinal terms, particularly his point that we are better served to reflect on the problem of "power" in the context of our doctrine of creation rather than our doctrine of sin. His cautiously optimistic view of the role of "democratic practices in the redeeming work of God outside the church" and that this follows from understanding the Holy

Spirit to be at work in the entire world, rings true. We need to take very seriously the Genesis chapter two image of the Spirit of God animating the "dust" and bringing forth the human being. Wherever there is life, the Spirit is present and at work.

I share Matt Hamsher's perception that the Empire Story has profoundly corrupted the actual practice of democracy in the United States (and elsewhere, too). I would *not* want "to embrace all of civic America without reservation," insofar as this corruption has spread to so many aspects of the practice of "democracy." Certainly, right now (and all too often in the past) the rhetoric of "democracy" is being used to underwrite some of the most egregiously imperialist actions the US has ever undertaken. To Hamsher's question, "What if the Democracy Story no less than the Empire Story is founded upon the violence of self-assertion at the expense of others?", I say that to the extent this is true I would advocate rejection of, and resistance to, those streams. However, the way I have defined the Democracy Story leads me to argue that this violence is not an inherent part of that Story but a case of the Empire Story stealing the rhetoric of democracy for its *anti*-democratic purposes. I am trying to argue for a *critical*, discerning approach toward "the political climate in the US today" wherein Anabaptist Christians can make common cause with others who see in the Democracy Story bases for resisting the Empire Story.

Scott Holland has been making a tremendous contribution to our broader Anabaptist conversation of culture and faith dating back at least to his 1986 *Conrad Grebel Review* essay, "God in Public." His writings never fail to provoke thought; he offers a crucial sensibility that challenges us toward openness to the treasures lying outside our particular tradition. Like Holland, I believe that the person of faith in North America is well-advised "to read both Jesus and Jefferson and to quote Emerson and Whitman as freely as Menno and Mack in the public square." This is why I found Stout's recent work so exciting; I take him to be calling us to quote *both* Emerson *and* Menno – in conversation with those quoting Jefferson *and* Moses, Whitman *and* Mohammad, Locke *and* Luther. My concern is that Holland at times seems to be relegating Jesus, Menno, Moses, Mohammad, and Luther to the realm of "personal morality," a realm we are advised to keep clearly distinct from that of "public ethics." Such counsel strikes me as precisely opposite to

what Anabaptist Christians in North America need to hear right now. Today, whether we approve or not, explicit Christian faith (so-called) is being planted right at the heart of the American public square – Christian faith that underwrites war, the death penalty, unrestricted corporate aggrandizement, hostility toward poor and vulnerable people, and other inhumane policies. To draw *directly* on our tradition – especially the peaceable way of Jesus and the Anabaptists – might be our signal contribution to "public ethics" in our present society.

I am pleased that Pete Blum brings John Howard Yoder's essay, "The Christian Case for Democracy," into the conversation. Blum's reading of my discussion as complementing Yoder's fits with my intention. This seems most clear in regard to my concern with how Christian pacifists as *pacifists* might understand their participation in North American public life. I believe that as pacifists we are required *both* to see the democratic nation-state as not being ultimate *and* to recognize we have a responsibility to take whatever options are open to us (and compatible with our Christian pacifism) to seek to influence public life in life-enhancing directions. Implied in Blum's references to Yoder is the sense that one major way we might engage in public conversations is by critique, using the stated values and justifications of the Democracy Story as bases for challenging its actual practices that foster violence and injustice. I also agree with Blum and Yoder that there is a close connection between the nature of the practice of "participatory democracy" within our church communities and in the wider society. [12]

Blum's comments about the "specter of 'systemic incommensurability'" are helpful for understanding some of the responses my essay has received. Some people, perhaps those especially sympathetic with Hauerwas and Koontz, seem anxious about my suggestion that one loyal to the Anabaptist Story can engage fully in the Democracy Story without being seriously compromised by the Empire Story. A bit of that anxiety could stem from a sense that these stories (or "languages") are truly incommensurable, that the Empire Story cannot be distinguished from the Democracy Story, and that if one seeks to work within the Democracy Story one has, in reality, to leave the Anabaptist Story. We do need much more discussion on this issue!

Peter Dula might be surprised that I quite agree with his drawing on Sheldon Wolin to characterize democracy. Dula writes, "democracy . . . names

a space in which diverse individuals and groups come together in hopes of discovering how their interests are tangled up with each other's interests. . . . Democracy is deliberation about what constitutes the good and how to achieve it." These thoughts closely approximate those of Stout, the main source for my perspective on the "Democracy Story." Dula says, "I am struck most by the differences between Wolin's version and Grimsrud's," but does not explain what those differences are. Based on his summary of Wolin, I cannot imagine what they are. Apparently Dula thinks one difference is that I would disagree with Wolin's view that "democracy" should not be preoccupied with "governing." However, given the priority I place on the "Anabaptist Story" and my numerous allusions to pacifism being at the core of our central contribution as Anabaptists to the Democracy Story, I do not believe we should seek to "govern." Dula writes disparagingly of "the relative priority in Grimsrud's account of democracy of things like 'voting and office-holding' or the repeated insistence on influencing the government." I wish he had given more weight to the more constructive latter two-thirds of my essay. In drawing on Stout, I am focusing on being part of the "conversation" and do not speak of voting, office holding, or influencing the government.

The four constructive points serving as the culmination of my argument focus on (1) being free to *critique* the Empire Story (meant to imply especially a critique of the anti-democratic nature of the American "hierarchical and elitist bureaucracies" that Dula accuses me of not caring about); (2) drawing on our pacifism to help our fellow citizens better understand how Empire subverts democracy; (3) bolstering humane, life-enhancing movements for self-determination around the world based on upside-down power – with the admittedly unstated assumption that such movements are "local and small-scale;" and (4) working at constructing alternative communities that embody peace – again an embrace of work that is local and small-scale. That is, I basically agree with Dula's portrayal of "democracy" and am bemused that he would have read me in the way he did.

Dula implies that I argue that focusing on "governmental policies" is the "privileged mode of fulfilling the mandate to work for a more just society." He contrasts this to "the careful cultivation of a radically democratic church life." In response, I point to the conclusion of my paper, where I state that a key element of a constructive Anabaptist response to the citizenship issue is this:

> We are called to live as a people of faith shaped by God's mercy whose common life embodies that mercy. This calling likely will lead people of faith to live differently from their wider culture. The Anabaptist commitment to share life together in practical ways as a means of sustaining a witness to the way of Jesus remains central to the possibilities of genuinely living faithfully.[13]

I am most emphatically *not* suggesting that Anabaptist Christians privilege a focus on governmental policies over fostering a radically democratic church life. I have suffered too many bruises myself while seeking to foster this radically democratic church life in my ten years of pastoring and nearly ten more years now teaching in a church-owned college, though, to be flippantly idealistic about this task. The work to witness to the way of peace in our wider society *and* the work to build faith communities that embody that way are *both* essential elements of resisting the domination system – and are both very demanding.

Dula's questions challenge me to restate the burden of my essay in this way: Our work as Anabaptist Christians of fostering a radically democratic church life is *directly relevant to* our citizenship in whatever "democratic" country we are part of – and, vice versa, our national citizenship is directly relevant to our church life. As we seek to build strong, healthy faith communities as part of being faithful in our social ethics *and* as we seek to function as peace-enhancing national citizens, our central focus in both areas should be to embody and articulate the core message of peace as found in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. And we dare not impose a self-limit on the range of this message by embracing an artificial "two language" schema that defines our faith community convictions and practices as being unintelligible or irrelevant to the wider world.

Notes

[1] I am especially indebted to our monthly theology discussion group at Eastern Mennonite University where we discussed a draft of the essay, Shalom Mennonite Congregation where I presented it in sermon form, and editor John Roth and anonymous referees of the *MQR* for helpful responses.

[2] 77.1 (January 2003): 93-108.

[3] This seems to be Scott Holland's position. He affirms Koontz's schema, but with what seems to be the opposite purpose – not to protect the Christian's "own personal or communal

ideological purity" (as he implies thinkers such as Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank seek to do) but to be freed to pursue a "public philosophy" delinked from the narrow particular-community constraints that Koontz seems to be championing for Anabaptist Christians.

[4] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

[5] Ted Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," *MQR* 78.3 (July 2004): 343.

[6] For an insightful critique of Koontz and Hauerwas on this issue, see Michael Cartwright, "Conflicting Interpretations of Christian Pacifism," in Terry Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of Warr and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 197-213.

[7] I found Peter Dula's comment in his paper that there is "no 'democracy story'" in the US to be quite odd when he links this comment with a discussion of "Emerson's America" as being distinct from "Columbus's America." Surely Dula is aware that Stout understands himself to be an Emersonian and portrays Emerson as a "father" of what I call the Democracy Story. I could also mention Cornel West's linking what he calls "deep democracy" (something very close to what I mean by the Democracy Story) with the work of *artists* such as Toni Morrison and his beloved jazz and blues musicians (*Democracy Matters* [New York: Random House, 2004]).

[8] I agree completely with Matt Hamsher's concern for how theorists for liberal democracy such as Thomas Hobbes underwrite imperialistic violence. I want to argue, though, that "democracy" in the name of Empire is actually a contradiction in terms. The Democracy Story I have in mind has always opposed Empire – going back to those among the American colonialists who sought humane relationships with Native Americans, such as the Pennsylvania Quakers. See John Nichols, ed., *Against the Beast: A Documentary History of American Opposition to Empire* (New York: Nation Books, 2004).

[9] Many Anabaptist Christians seem all too sanguine about recent surveys in the US showing that Americans self-identified as Christians are *more* likely to support violence (as in the death penalty and the War on Iraq) than non-Christians. In light of such a fundamental difference on a central issue of faith for Anabaptist Christians, how does it even make sense to talk about being part of the same "body of Christ"?

[10] Some of these and similar thinkers, activists, and artists are mentioned by Stout in *Democracy and Tradition* and by Cornel West in *Democracy Matters*.

[11] *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 61-70. See also Yoder's essay, "The Christian Case for Democracy," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), especially pages 166-68, "In Praise of Holy Experiments."

[12] I discuss Yoder's portrayal of communal discernment processes at some length in "Pacifism and Knowing: 'Truth' in the Theological Ethics of John Howard Yoder," *MQR* 77.3 (July 2003): 403-15. Like Blum I allude to recent skirmishes in Mennonite churches concerning homosexuality as an example of problematic failures to follow healthy discernment processes.

[12] "Anabaptist Faith," 361.

[13] I sketch an approach to applying Yoder's pacifist epistemology to making church life more "radically democratic" in "Pacifism and Knowing."