Global Anabaptist Faith and North American Democracy

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I will respond to Ted Grimsrud's paper as a Canadian, a Mennonite, and a student of systematic theology. At the outset, I will make three brief observations. First, the Canadian Mennonite history of negotiating specific privileges with the government, serving as senior civil servants or as members of provincial or federal parliaments, and testifying before parliamentary committees and Royal Commissions has been based on, and has resulted in, a relatively positive view of government and democracy. I recognize all this in contrast to the visceral reactions of many American Mennonites to the 2004 United States election. Second, there is a danger that Canadians are let off the hook too easily with regard to American hegemony. We have the luxury of distancing ourselves from US policies. Further, we can present our apparent involvement in the domination these policies might cause as evidence that we have been forced or duped into complicity. This can obscure the fact that we are active partners with the US in the inequalities of the economic globalization system, have often joined the US in military initiatives, and actively reproduce many assumptions of American culture. Third, there is a converse danger that we will be lumped together with the US discussion. This denies real cultural and historical differences. That Canadians do not have a constitutional separation of church and state, yet practically have a most minimal civil religion, is but one example.

With these observations in mind, I venture a positive response to Grimsrud's article. Below I will try to extend his argument and to cast the net wider for resources with which to do that. Whatever the Anabaptist Story is, it obligates its participants to engage in the pursuit of the common good, even and especially to reject and resist oppressive configurations of worldly power, and to make practical, though not ultimate, use of democratic institutions for this end. I welcome Grimsrud's appeal to Mennonites to continually discern how convictions and practices, and especially our peace position, can be an effective witness in the world.

The Anabaptist Story

In order to get to the essence of the Anabaptist Story, Grimsrud offers a parallel with how scholars of the historical Jesus point to a fact that is independent of biased reports – namely that Jesus was executed as a political criminal – as the lens through which to assess whatever is said of his life and

teaching. Grimsrud proposes that what the various sixteenth-century Anabaptist groups had in common was their being viewed with suspicion and hostility by civil and religious authorities.[1] Viewing Anabaptist diversity in light of this commonality allows us to appropriate their core legacy for today: a free church, the conviction that Christians should not fight, an upside-down notion of social power, and a commitment to economic sharing.

The elements Grimsrud identifies are crucial aspects of the Anabaptist Story, but I question whether this approach is an adequate way of leveraging an Anabaptist core. In the first place, it assumes that the difference is the essence, i.e., that the identity of Anabaptists is rooted in what they did not share with Catholics or Lutherans. This is an inadequate view of the church and renders inaccessible to us the rich depths of the Christian tradition. It also overlooks the fact that Anabaptism was arguably a movement of spiritual renewal, calling for faithfulness to Christ, which issued in some specific, indispensable social-political-ecclesial consequences. We ought to understand our core story in significant continuity with the Christian tradition where that is the case, but also as one that dissents on the issues Grimsrud identifies. Secondly, the isolation of principles obscures the fact that the Anabaptist Story is always an already-embodied set of beliefs, practices, precedents, and interpretations. What an "upside-down notion of social power" is cannot readily be isolated from attempts to instantiate it. This does not mean that what is, is what ought to be. But it does imply turning attention to specific experiences in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and assessing a mixed record of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, without a clear set of theoretical principles to do the sorting.

Does this make a difference? Does a turn to a more complex historical and global record give clues for taking Anabaptist convictions into the public square? I believe the answer is yes, because it will draw attention to the Anabaptist Story as already engaged in the Democracy Story or the Empire Story. Here I draw from the experience of my own Dutch-North German-Russian-General Conference tradition. In the last three centuries, these Mennonites often sought special privileges and exemptions, and in return provided their host with specific agricultural services and otherwise exemplary citizenship. In seeking exemption from military services, Mennonites have often found that autocratic rulers – William of Orange, Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe of Upper Canada, William Penn of Pennsylvania – were willing to grant these requests.[2] Moreover, these Mennonites were often settled on land to the

disadvantage of those already there. This should be an occasion for serious self-reflection and confession, since it suggests that insofar as our pacifism has been of a strongly two-kingdom variety, it has at times sought the shelter of empire and shared in its spoils. We are not in a position simply to *choose* to engage the Democracy Story, the Empire Story, both or neither. Rather, we are already embroiled in the complex dynamics of their interplay. What is open to us is how we understand the complexities and compromises of our history, and how we retrieve it for the purpose of present engagement. I am not claiming that the Anabaptist Story gives way to the Empire Story, though perhaps there is something about how our Anabaptist identity has been remembered and articulated that led, at times, to an alliance of nonresistance and empire.

Recognizing the need for confession in light of aspects of unfaithfulness, we should also seek constructive lessons from elements of faithfulness in those same experiences. What can we learn from the nineteenth-century Mennonite commonwealth in Russia, where Mennonites effectively ran their own large-scale municipal governments within the Russian system? What about the current experience of the Colombian Mennonite Church, involved in high-level peace negotiations, targeted by government, paramilitary and rebel groups, and effecting the inclusion of conscientious objection options in the constitution? What do the efforts of Mennonites in Indonesia to be agents of reconciliation within a Muslim-Christian dynamic show us about non-violence in an ostensibly democratic yet deeply divided public space? What about the issues of involvement in public life which the Mennonite Church in Asuncion is facing, given that the president of Paraguay attends that church and that his wife and several cabinet ministers are members?

Answers to these questions may help us see how the larger question of which of the two languages to speak in public is answered in practice in different circumstances, especially if we ask these communities how they understand their public witness in light of Anabaptist identity. This strategy reflects that our tradition is a living one and we must learn how to draw on a range of experiences in order to provide ourselves with an orientation, as Anabaptists, for the future. We should certainly continue to appeal to the sixteenth century, but we must also "thicken" the tradition to which we can refer for handles on our identity. I am suggesting that US Mennonites consider how global experiences may help to fill in what it means to Anabaptist and/or Mennonite, and I commend the same thing to Canadian Mennonites.

Empire and Democracy Stories

Grimsrud draws attention to Stanley Hauerwas's concern that participation in democratic practices not inhibit the capacity of Christians to speak Christianly. With regard to the Empire Story, I suggest that our capacity to keep our political discussion theological and to address arguments specifically against the logic of empire, rather than that of order, the state, or democracy *per se*, might be enhanced by listening to someone like Augustine. Though Augustine is known for his founding contributions to the Just War Theory, it is his diagnoses of the pathologies of empire that might be useful here. He devotes much of the *City of God* to showing how the pagan ethic of glory was rooted in a fear of death. Fear as a foundation for political ideology masks itself by self-deception and issues in political deception. Robert Dodaro argues that while several Catholic ethicists argued that the first Gulf War met just war criteria, they were collectively un-Augustinian by neglecting to consider whether the rhetorical deception and self-deception of empire renders the facts so inaccessible as to make a just war calculus unintelligible.[3] This charge applies doubly to the web of deceptions around the recent Iraq war.

I hope that we as Mennonites might bring a set of practices and convictions about truth-telling into the public sphere in a way that engages both just war Christians and citizens in general for whom a truthful rendering of circumstances is a condition for applying pragmatic reasoning. Grimsrud's argument may be extended only slightly to say that a free-church epistemology allows us to name the lies of empire and that we ought to speak this analysis to all who will listen. Lies, says Augustine, are intrinsically evil and cannot be justified. Furthermore, political lies are practically destabilizing and effectively preclude a just social order.[4] An indispensable condition for a just social order is its capacity to bear the search for truth, and to be a forum for truth-tellers. This then serves both as a criterion for any political arrangement, including democracy, and as a condition for the reception of our truthful witness as Christians. My brief engagement with Augustine presupposes that we must participate in the public sphere first and foremost as members of the Body of Christ. This means learning from aspects of the Christian tradition that may guide us, challenge us, or provide common language with which to engage fellow Christians who see questions of democracy and empire very differently.

Providence and the Holy Spirit

Central to Grimsrud's paper is his claim, following Jeffrey Stout, that democracy can consist in a set of practices for a substantive good (though for Grimsrud, not a final good), and is not merely a set of procedures reducing public discourse to its lowest common denominator. Rather, it is about removing certain constraints so that insightful, eloquent, and even spiritual arguments and practices can be freed for the benefit of the common good, and, insofar as these arguments are accepted, form social norms that give shape to a common good.[5]

Phrased pneumatologically, Stout is suggesting that democratic practices can free gifts for circulation in the community. The possibility that these gifts are both within and without the church is something to take seriously. Regarding this exchange of gifts, Grimsrud points out that "Hauerwas called on the church to [be itself] by making sure to hear the voice of the 'weakest member'. . . ."[6] Yet, when the church models listening to its weakest members, it might hear surprising things. I suggest that the attempt of the Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Project to hear the experiences of Mennonite lawyers, police officers, social workers, and civic officials – those who have not usually been heard in Mennonite discussions of the church's witness in the world – may turn our attention to *diverse* ways that Anabaptist engagement in democracy is already implied.[7] I hasten to add that what Mennonites in fact do need not be what they should do. However, the requirement of the church to be the church, and to take seriously the accounts its various members give of what it means to be Christian in the public sphere, must be considered as a possible movement of the Spirit *within* the Body of Christ. This is especially true if our free-church ecclesiology affirms that members of the covenant community bear the witness of the Holy Spirit.

We must also ask about the movement of the Spirit *outside* the church. The debate about whether and when to speak one or both of the "two languages" likely reflects our underdevelopment of a doctrine of providence. While the tradition of Schleitheim affirms that magistrates are "ordained by God, outside the perfection of Christ," we have not often considered the providential arrangements by which God orders power in the world. We are ambivalent about whether power falls under the doctrine of sin or the doctrine of creation.[8] If it is under sin, then our attempts to speak a "second language" will always be a tragic compromise. But if it is under creation, then we might hope that our convictions about the *arrangements* of that power, expressed

in either a first or second language, need not be compromised in order to be intelligible. That we might work in *ad hoc* coalitions with non-Mennonite, non-Christian, or non-religious groups with similar specific convictions about power arrangements need not mean betraying our calling to be radical disciples of Jesus. I am not suggesting that the state is itself redemptive or that democracy be identified with God's providential purposes. Rather, God's ongoing creative activity manifests itself outside the church, in concrete though often veiled ways, and all God's work is coordinated towards God's redemptive purposes.

Our theological attention has often been rightly turned to questions of Christology – to the nature of the Lordship of Christ in the church and in the world, to the abiding activity of the Holy Spirit to realize this Lordship within the church and without. Implicit here is a strong understanding of the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father *and the Son*, and thus of the church as the prime or sole bearer of God's redeeming activity in history. What has been neglected is the specific relationship between the Father and the Spirit (while of course being disciplined by Trinitarian logic) – and thus the role of institutions, such as democratic practices, in God's redeeming work outside the church. If the church finds its witness is effectively received in the world, it will not be because of its own efforts but because God is already at work there. Our active efforts to "be church" must be accompanied with humility, confession, and patience, and the vision by which we see God at work in myriad ways must be sharpened. Thus, Grimsrud's contention that Anabaptists can show the idolatry of the Empire system in concrete, accessible ways based on our confession of Christ presupposes that the Spirit is at work in the world. To bring pacifist commitments into democratic conversations is to trust that God's Spirit may use them for redemptive ends.

Notes

[1] Ted Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," *MQR* 78 (2004): 343.
[2] T. D. Regehr, *Peace, Order & Good Government: Mennonites & Politics in Canada* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2000), 15-16.
[3] Robert Dodaro, "Eloquent Lies, Just Wars and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading Augustine's *City of God* in a 'Postmodern' World," *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 95-104.
[4] *Ibid.*, 87-89.
[5] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 150-51, 167.
[6] Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," 353.

[7] *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Scottdale: Herald Press, forthcoming).
[8] Cf. John D. Rempel, "Tentative Postulates for Speaking Truth to Power: The Case of the United Nations," paper presented at Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Conference, Akron, PA, August 1-4, 2004.