Self and/as Victim: A Reflection on "Mennonite" Ethics

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Writing this essay has been interesting, because I have had to confront explicitly the question of whether being Mennonite affects the way I teach ethics. This question highlights the role in my teaching played by unexamined assumptions about how "Mennonites" do, or should do, ethics (*which* Mennonites is a pertinent question, but I will not address it here). I will begin by naming and clarifying two of those unexamined assumptions, describe the way that I teach ethics, and then draw some conclusions about how what I do might be thought of as "Mennonite." My approach to ethics has less to do with isolating a distinctive set of Mennonite practices or beliefs, analyzing them, and recommending them to others, and more to do with cultivating self-knowledge in the space created by acknowledging ourselves and others as victims, victimizers, and survivors.

Much of Christian ethics played in a Mennonite key trades on the idea that there are "Mennonite distinctives" that should be celebrated and that ought to affect how ethics is done. I have no use whatsoever for this view. The valorization of Mennonite distinctives has characterized a brand of white heteropatriarchal Mennonite theology and ethics that I hope is in rapid and irrecoverable decline. I do not say this because the Mennonite distinctives which have been suggested are not really all that distinct, although that is true. That claim disguises a much deeper problem of exclusion and methodological violence, namely that Mennonite-distinctives-language is a privilege engine. Its effect has always been to theorize a normative version of Mennonitism that has (at least) two functions.

First, "Mennonite distinctives" creates marginalized Mennonites who constantly need to prove their bona fides vis-à-vis the normative version. One might think of the neocolonialist attitudes with which Mennonite theology and worship in the southern hemisphere is met by culture-appropriating white Mennonites in North America, or, within North America itself, of the way LGBTIQ+ Mennonites in Mennonite Church USA today consistently bear the burden of proof for showing just how they "measure up" to being

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Mennonite. Here is an example that combines the two: Mennonite World Conference (MWC) met in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in July 2015, and, among other elements, worship included music from around the world, as it had at previous world conferences. Inclusiveness undoubtedly formed part of the rationale for the gathering's singing of hymns and sacred songs from around the world, but as in any inclusion effort one has to ask, Who is the inclusion for? Is its effect to provide moments of welcome for people from across the globe, or does it have more to do with showing that North American Mennonites can be welcoming, that they can absorb musical marginality with virtuosity while not disturbing their sense of being central to Mennonite experience? What does the need to demonstrate inclusivity say about actual levels of inclusion and marginality within MWC, both about the groups of Mennonites whose inclusion is being signaled through songs, worship, and global villages, and about the groups of Mennonites, like Pink Menno,[1] whose exclusion was also signaled in being relegated to the parking lot?

Second, "Mennonite distinctives" clears space for privileged squabbling about the right way to state whatever normative version of Mennonitism is under consideration (pacifism or nonresistance in the 1940s, nonviolent atonement or not in the 2000s). The word "Mennonite" is an empty box until it is filled up with someone's version of what Mennonite means, and that version, whatever it is, will not only be good for some people and bad for others, it will also end up plaguing the people whom it privileges. To paraphrase Judith Butler, the word "Mennonite" creates a polity through constitutive exclusions that "return to haunt the [polity] predicated upon their absence."[2] In Butler's understanding, the return of such exclusions forces an "expansion and rearticulation" of what the structure under consideration itself means, which she argues should be a liberalizing movement. But where Mennonites are concerned, the return of the excluded has just as often resulted in a reassertion of exclusion as it has in an expansion or rearticulation of what being Mennonite is about.

[1] See www.pinkmenno.org for a description of the group's rationale and activities.

[2] Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism" in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 11.

A third function of Mennonite-distinctives-language is to furnish Mennonites with an untiring sense that they are better at Christian ethics than other Christians are (Lutherans don't really care about discipleship, Catholics don't really care about nonviolence, Methodists don't really care about community, and so on). Apart from the narcissism involved in this stance, Mennonites are often guilty of comparing apples and oranges, Mennonite theologians with Catholic lay people, for example. So, when Mennonites point to the views of North American Mennonite theologians on Christian nonviolence to say that the church of Jesus Christ is nonviolent while ignoring both the overall decline in support for Christian nonviolence among members of Mennonite and affiliated churches since World War II and the current (largely, but by no means exclusively, lay) Catholic peace movement that began in the second half of the 20th century, they are making a rather clumsy and inaccurate comparison. Such comparisons are ideological, propping up Mennonite identities, diminishing others, and obscuring internal faults by presenting the lacunae in others' views as essential but those of Mennonites as accidental. In this sense, the Mennonite distinctives agenda is exclusionary: it is built around a deliberate marginalizing of the wider Christian tradition and isolates Mennonites from it in ways that build up traditions of ignorance about what "other" Christians do or believe. So, North American Mennonites, with their distinctives in hand and harking back to the ethical dualism of Conrad Grebel and Michael Sattler, have never really moved on to figure out what the point of being Mennonite is if it is not to allow you to compare yourself favorably to other Christians.

That last bit may overstate the case somewhat, but I think that among the faculty currently teaching ethics at Mennonite institutions in the US and Canada, more than half of us are skeptical about Mennonite distinctives—whether they exist in any generalizable way, and, if they do, whether they are useful for ethics. If the Mennonite distinctives agenda was ever important to Mennonites teaching ethics, it was to a generation wrestling with the way the Niebuhr brothers capitalized on Ernst Troeltsch's dismissal of the Anabaptists and framed Christian pacifism as countercultural in irresponsible and idealistic ways. Of course, those same ethicists had to contend with (and even produced) a Mennonite historiography driven by ideological concerns with how Mennonites fit into North American society,

which meant they had to demonstrate both the existence and continuity of Mennonite distinctives over the last 500 years. In a sense, however, between 1989 and 2000 Mennonite theology went mainstream in North America, so some of us in graduate school at the time did not have to prove that the Radical Reformations were worth investigating, generate a defense of pacifism, or otherwise invest heavily in articulating "distinctives."

Why do I harbor this assumption that Mennonite distinctives are central to the way Mennonites teach ethics? I doubt that the assumption is descriptively true of Mennonite ethicists today; I wonder whether it has ever been a descriptively true assumption; and, I wonder, if it has not been descriptively true, why do I keep assuming that it has been and in a way that very clearly steers how I teach?

One possible reason is that Christian ethics suffers in Mennonite colleges and universities not because there are few people there with relevant expertise, but rather because many faculty members without relevant expertise think they have it. In our general education curricula, we do not regularly ask English professors to teach Sociology, Mathematics professors to teach Chemistry, Education professors to teach Kinesiology, or History professors to teach Spanish. But we do regularly ask such professors to teach Christian Ethics, at least under the guise of teaching the "compatibility" of Christian faith and values with the said disciplines. What happens when, as entire faculties at universities, we institutionalize on a long-term basis the assumption that some general undergraduate training—or, as an outlier, a seminary course or so—is sufficient to allow instructors competently to "integrate" Christian ethics into their own discipline? One sure outcome is a dilution of appropriate disciplinary grammars and methods in order to accommodate the blunt skills of non-specialists. A concomitant outcome involves students learning inordinately simplified or badly parsed versions of Christian moral reasoning, the kind of thing for which one forgives Sunday School teachers, but which is hardly appropriate as an outcome of undergraduate education.

I am not simply suggesting that Mennonite universities and colleges should respect the disciplinary boundaries of modern academia. Such boundaries, after all, are the product of early 20th-century university administrative and professional credentialing structures, structures which

have always been in flux. I think it is a good thing that, in contrast to reinforcing clear professional and disciplinary boundaries, Mennonite institutions have invested heavily in interdisciplinary programs. Moreover, I am in favor of disciplinary distinctions when they are justified by the growth of bodies of knowledge that are too varied and intricate to be competently examined by one set of faculty.

What I object to is the assumption, enshrined in general education curricula, that Christian theology and ethics are not such bodies of knowledge—that anyone with an advanced degree in any discipline is in principle qualified to teach college-level courses in these subjects by dint of personal religious affiliation. As one example, which I use only because I doubt that Bluffton University stands alone in this predicament, I teach a general education course at Bluffton called "Christian Values in a Global Community," which examines moral issues pertaining to globalization, underdevelopment, and ecological change from a Christian perspective. I am one of six or seven faculty members who more-or-less regularly teach sections of the course, which we offer every semester. In all of our curriculum, this is the one course in which the need to play up Mennonite distinctives is most conspicuously on display. Yet, for the 20-plus years of its existence, it has had no specifically stated learning objectives. In consequence, the learning objectives that instructors assume are often vague and unmeasurable: for instance, students "should find the course moving." Yet I am met with incredulous stares when I ask whether my colleagues would think "finding it moving sometimes" is an appropriate outcome for a course in their own disciplines.

A second unexamined assumption I harbor is this: during the 20th century many Mennonites thought that Christian ethics equaled the application of biblical principles to life. This view involves a foundationalist biblical hermeneutic that teaches people to refuse to take responsibility for their interpretations of the Bible. For instance, one defense of pacifism from Mennonites is based on the claim that "the Bible teaches nonviolence." Often, this view is grounded in the claim that the "clear" sayings of Jesus with regard to nonviolence are epistemologically basic and sufficient warrant for a superstructure of interpretation that accounts for the meaning of "more difficult" passages. Once what the Bible teaches or says has been discovered,

then the moral life is about applying the said teaching consistently without too much fancy thought.

While it should be obvious that discovery itself is a moral endeavor, the hermeneutical principles that people adduce to justify "straightforward" interpretations of the Bible are not really what interests me here. Instead, I take issue with the idea that the Bible is an agent of any kind, that it "says" or "teaches" anything, not only because the Bible is a book, as good for propping open a door as it is as scripture, depending on what one needs to use it for, but also (and far more importantly) because treating the Bible as an agent of any kind deflects moral responsibility away from its readers.[3] If readers of scripture are passive recipients of the meaning of texts, then blame for the negative consequences of applied interpretations can be laid upon the Bible (or God) rather than upon the interpreters themselves. If the text yields its authoritative meaning on its own and this meaning has a practical force, then it makes little sense to hold readers accountable for attempting to put it into practice.

The problem with this approach to the Bible is that texts do not interpret themselves. What the text "says" or what we "hear" when we "listen to the voice" of scripture is a metaphor for the activity of interpretation, because people interpret texts. Even calling a text "scripture" is an interpretive act, because "scripture" is not a quality that inheres in some texts. Instead, it names a commitment made by people to interpret texts as sacred, and this commitment places the moral agency exercised by interpreters—not the agency ascribed to a text—at issue in reading the Bible. Such moral agency will be a function of what interpreting people are like, because moral agency not only elucidates but also presumes ontology.

Hermeneutics depends on answering ontological questions, albeit often tacitly and certainly inconclusively. Interpretation is based on and demands prior discernment about what kinds of things are good for you. Representatives of the Roman Catholic tradition often addressed such questions with appeals to "natural law," and they recognized that, just as

[3] See Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1ff, and Dale B. Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), 15-32.

much as hermeneutics demanded an ontology like natural law, so also natural law was affected by hermeneutical issues, including those of scriptural interpretation. Likewise, the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" identifies multiple, mutually implicating factors in Christian self-understanding, and makes little sense apart from the recognition that the "normed norms" of reason, tradition, and experience are themselves ways of answering ontological questions that are not only inflected by "what the Bible says."

As with natural law and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, one might also draw attention to "the Gospel of All Creatures," which some early Anabaptists used precisely as a way to gain ontological purchase on the interpretation of scripture *beyond* the Reformation mantra of *sola scriptura*. It is not so much that they said, "Well, Scripture speaks of the suffering of Christ, and, look, so also many other things tell of the importance of sacrificial suffering," as it is that they said, "Even if scripture did not speak centrally of the suffering of Christ, we would still know that redemptive suffering is the way of all things, because of the myriad examples we see every day all around us." That is, the redemptive force of suffering was, for proponents of the Gospel of All Creatures, a comment about nature, ontology, what kinds of things creatures are. It helped to create a hermeneutical principle for interpreting scripture and did not merely reflect "what the Bible says," since what the Bible says was the very issue under contention.

To sum up this long and winding road, I assume that Mennonite ethics as taught in post-secondary settings has been rather deaf to the moral complexity of the hermeneutical concerns I have enumerated above, short circuiting them with ahistorical appeals to the Bible, peace, or, sometimes, to community—without attention to the phenomenological, performative, and historical details of how, in fact, communities do interpret.

I could go on in the vein of "assumptions that I harbor but teach against," but I want to transition from talking about what I think people should not do, to what I do when I teach ethics. At Bluffton I teach three general education religion courses in which I ask students to address the same moral question from differing angles. These courses are Christian Theology; Christian Ethics; and War, Peace, and Nonviolence. The moral question framing each class is this: Under what conditions can you live your life without victimizing

others? My fundamental perspective is that everything important about Christianity falls within the compass of this question. To be clear, asking about victims is not morally reductive; for Christians it is, instead, a central part of coming to know ourselves as worshipers of a crucified and forgiving God.[4]

At the center of the Christian imagination is a story about a victim. Whatever else Jesus of Nazareth did, he went to his death as a victim of the collusion of state and sacerdotal power. The canonical Gospels portray him as having gone to his death a willing victim ("I lay down my life of my own accord") and a forgiving victim ("Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"), and these features clarify the way he was victimized. But, as recognitions of the specificity of Jesus' story, these characteristics must not be universalized. When Christian theologians and biblical scholars have paid attention to the rhetorical and ideological registers of the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus' victimization, the result has sometimes been to recommend Jesus' attitude to others who are being victimized, often with appalling results. If we think carefully about Christian martyrdom narratives from the first three centuries, we can see that such recommendation was going on from quite early within the Christian movement. It is difficult to avoid concluding that Jesus' death was being written about *in the New Testament* in such a way that it provided a model of how Christians should face violent death, and that, moreover, many martyr narratives were refractions of the already-refracted model Jesus narratives. There is a difficulty here with the need to subordinate individual narratives to the plot of a master narrative in a way that robs these stories of their own integrity.[5] It is hard to overstate the case for paying attention to this problem, in light of the way Mennonites have helped perpetuate the myth that acts of victimization are somehow redeemed by the attitude or responses of survivors.[6] Surely such redemption is not

[4] My key touchstones for the understanding of "victim" that I use here are the many works of James Alison, especially *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice* (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013), as well as Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994). Behind both texts stands Sebastian Moore, *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger* (London: DLT Press, 1981).

[5] See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2-3.

[6] See, e.g., the articles and posts collected on *Our Stories Untold* (blog), www.ourstoriesuntold.com;

impossible, but an ethic that relies on it both normalizes victimization and places an inappropriate moral burden on survivors; each of these outcomes needs to be resisted and dismantled wherever it is found.

If, however, dimensions of victimization are unavoidable in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, it is because the image of the crucified imprints upon Christian imaginations the recognition that in the person of Jesus God dies a victim of human aggression, that, therefore, God is where the victims are. Thus, the great questions of Christianity—questions about how people today learn to live with the story of God the victim as the focus of their own stories—ask about victims. Who victimizes whom? Why? And how would things need to change in order to be different? So, when I ask students to consider the conditions under which they might live their lives without victimizing others, I am personalizing these large questions.

Ethics as I see it is a tool for cultivating self-knowledge, not in the much maligned post-Enlightenment individualist sense of the self, but in the sense of the self as a projection, emanation, or symptom of what James Alison calls "the social other," by which he means "everything that exists in the universe, on a human level (not God). This includes anything with the capacity to move us emotionally or physically (e.g., other people, weather, country, geography, etc.)."[7] Self-knowledge for Christians has a lot to do with coming to acknowledge the ways you participate in the stories of victims, which might include your own story of being victimized, being a survivor, or both.

It is extremely tough work to broach this set of subjects with my students. If anything is complicating for the sense of self with which they approach college, it is acknowledging the space in their lives occupied by victims. I do not mean simply in the bland sense of an inability to take on board the full weight of the unacknowledged ways in which their lives are built on the backs of others—although cultivating consciousness about this

Ruth E. Krall, *The Elephants in God's Living Room: Clergy Sexual Abuse and Institutional Clericalism*, vol. 1, Theoretical Issues (Enduring Space, 2012), especially chapter 10: http:/ruthkrall.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/09/The-Elephants-in-Gods-Living-Room-Vol-1-%C2%A9.pdf.

[7] Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, 89.

reality is often where we focus our academic attention in courses in Christian ethics. I mean, instead, the sense that many of my students are survivors of one kind or another or may have victimized others in direct ways, and that they are only just beginning to grapple with such facts about themselves. For instance, many of these students come to college with experiences of sexualized violence in their pasts; sometimes these experiences are reinforced by further experiences in college, and each leaves a traumatic hole in the lives not only of survivors but often of perpetrators as well.

My point here is not that everyone is a victim, though I take the force of the claim that perpetrators of sexual violence can in a sense also be victims of rape culture, of assumptions and practices that normalize sexual violence. Instead, my point is that stories about victims are central to self-knowledge for survivors and perpetrators, and that coming to know oneself in the face of stories like those created by experiences of sexualized violence will involve disavowing deflective strategies of self-presentation.

So, the three courses that I teach are all arenas where we test and build our capacity for cultivating self-knowledge with and as victims. How can you live your life without victimizing others? is not simply a question about adopting practices of walking softly in non-injurious ways through the world, though it is at least that. It is also a question about the kinds of character ingredient in a sense of self that is being released from the anxiety generated by its past of injury and harm. Here are some of the forms these questions take:

> 1. If God is not a thing of any kind, not in any sort of competition with anything that is, not an object to be grasped by the senses or intellect, always pulling human hearts and minds forward in a never-ending journey of transformation from "glory unto glory," then what could it mean when Jesus identifies the first and greatest commandment as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might," other than "to love your neighbor as yourself"? Many theological problems are generated by our failure to read the parallelism between the first and second of the greatest commandments as *exegetical* (parabolic, midrashic) rather than *additive*, for the God whom Christians worship has no image but the image that

God created in the human being. God the human is God the victim, so how does your trust in God turn you toward victims?

2. What social practices are necessary to acknowledge victims and survivors, participation in which is partially constitutive of those stable dispositions of mind and body Christians call virtue or moral excellence? Hospitality, receptivity, vulnerability, charity, moderation, truthfulness, fidelity, patience—what forms do these strengths take in human lives informed by Jesus, and how do they depend for our induction into their practice on the presence and acknowledgment of victims and survivors in our lives? How are these strengths enriched in their embodiment in human lives as we move toward consciousness of our propensity to victimize and, having been so conscienticized, away from the behaviors and compulsions in which we are entangled and with which we create victims and maintain their victimization?

3. And, finally, not Is war permissible or justifiable, and if so, under what conditions? but What kind of victims are created by war, and how have Christians encountered those victims? Beyond categories like "just war" or "pacifism," which might be summarized as methods of avoiding by logic the realities of violent conflict as victim makers, and in any event indicate a theological conflict that is probably irresolvable, we can ask about and attend to who the victims are, and what is necessary to end the victimization and restore or transform relationships disfigured by violence.[8] In addition to technique questions of the kind addressed by restorative justice and peacebuilding professionals, there are also relevant historical and theological

[8] Two recent relevant critiques of the theological stand-off between just war and pacifism are Mark Allman and Tobias Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post-War Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2010), and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Each book cites "just peacemaking" as a promising alternative to the just war or pacifism dichotomy, although in my view, their chief strength lies elsewhere, namely in the attention paid to the effects of violent conflict on civilian and vulnerable populations.

> contextualizing perspectives to offer on these topics. What, for instance, did the Pax Dei mean for children and women in 10th-century France? How did the transition from militia to standing military affect vulnerable populations and religious minorities in the 19th-century US? How has the use of drones and smart technologies changed Christian perception of, resistance to, or support for using military lethal force? Obviously, these questions are pertinent not simply to an appropriately contextualized understanding of state-sponsored war but also to just policing, Black Lives Matter, disability, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and the ever-expanding panoply of concerns in which the stakes of persons who experience victimization and marginalization are being visibly represented.

So, is the key to the Christian life "authentic community," "peace," "simplicity," "discipleship," or a combination thereof? No. How, then, is what I do "Mennonite" in a recognizable way?

A course that is an arena for testing and building the capacity to cultivate self-knowledge with and as victims connects to stories about Mennonite history and people. One of the original engines for articulating Mennonite distinctives was the story about Mennonites as persecuted people. While this story has been a way of reinforcing privilege (Marlene Epp's work on how sexualized violence gets excluded from Mennonite martyr narratives to privilege the death of men is pertinent here),[9] a pedagogy that personalizes large questions about victimhood presumes a similar ontology to what characterized the Gospel of All Creatures. That is, I try to organize my classes so that the students' own experiences and reflections on victimhood form the approach of inquiry to theological questions about God and the self.

Perhaps because of persecution, early Anabaptist communities grabbed whatever was at hand (popular theologies, personal reflection, folklore, guild laws, snippets of scholasticism) to make sense of and justify their theological claims. Most of those communities were not particularly

[9] Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2000).

sophisticated, nor did they have the resources to articulate and institutionalize what they were saying and doing in systematic, unreproachable ways. Our situation is not that different. Ableist ideology, racism, and ethnocentrism, heterosexist and cisgender bigotry, global capital, and all the other functions of the heteropatriarchal Evangelical-capitalist resonance machine—these ideas and their representatives are as surely lethal to many of my students as the various Magisteria of the 16th century were to early Anabaptists, so we must use whatever is at hand to have conversations that allow students to reflect on their own personalities, experiences, and cultural markers on "big questions" regarding victimhood, all while not being overly concerned that these reflections fall properly within "Mennonite tradition."[10] The issue is not Does the pedagogy measure up to some standard of being Mennonite? That is no question of life or death. By contrast, How can I live my life without victimizing others? is.[11]

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[10] For an explanation of the "Evangelical-capitalist resonance machine," see William E. Connolly, *Christianity and Capitalism, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2008).
[11] My thanks to Peter Dula, Stanley Hauerwas, Isaac Villegas, Joseph Wiebe, and Jackie Wyse-Rhodes for reading and commenting on drafts of this essay.