Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect

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In his address at the 1983 consultation on hermeneutics and systematic theology at the Institute of Mennonite Studies in Elkhart, Indiana, Marlin Jeschke began with a striking claim: "One of the obvious things about Mennonite systematic theology is that we don't have one—at least in the usual professional sense of the term."[1] If by "Mennonite systematic theology" (hereafter, MST) Jeschke simply meant "systematic theology written by a Mennonite," then his claim is obviously false.[2] I take it, however, that he meant something stronger—something like "systematic theology written in an explicitly Mennonite key." Thus, Jeschke contrasts the apparent void in MST with the prevalence of systematic theologies developed by "Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists," to which we might add Wesleyans, evangelicals, the Eastern Orthodox, and others.[3] Whereas these traditions produce systematic theologies that explicitly take account of the personalities and particularities of their respective tradition, Mennonites—at least up to 1983—have been hesitant to do so.

However, in that same year, Mennonite theologians began to engage in an unusual flurry of activity revolving around the role of systematic theology for Mennonites. Early in 1983 *The Conrad Grebel Review* released its inaugural issue that included the late A. James Reimer's essay, "The

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[1] Marlin Jeschke, "How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology," in *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 9.

[2] Cf., e.g., Daniel Kaufman, *Bible Doctrine: A Treatise on the Great Doctrines of the Bible Pertaining to God, Angels, Satan, the Church, and the Salvation, Duties and Destiny of Man* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1918); J.C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology: An Interpretation of the Doctrinal Content of Scripture, Written to Strengthen a Childlike Faith in Christ* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1954); Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968); Edmund G. Kaufman, *Basic Christian Convictions* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1972).

[3] Jeschke, "How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology," 9.

Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," which sparked lively discussion on the role of systematic theology for Mennonites that continued virtually unabated for the ensuing several issues.[4] Moreover, the consultation in which Jeschke—as well as Reimer and others—participated was held in June,[5] and the essays from the consultation were collected and published as *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*.[6]

Having been born in February of the same year, I was unable to participate in these early discussions.[7] Thus, as a modest contribution to a discussion already thirty years in progress—and in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of *The Conrad Grebel Review*'s initial issue—I would like to look back at the MSTs produced over the last three decades before returning to Jeschke's statement and assessing to what extent it still might be true

[4] A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* [hereafter *CGR*] 1, no.1 (1983): 33-55; Howard John Loewen, [Reply to A. James Reimer, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology"], *CGR* 1, no. 2 (1983): 56-58; A. James Reimer, "Further Reflections on a Possible Mennonite Theology [rejoinder to Howard John Loewen]," *CGR* 1, no. 3 (1983): 51-54; J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *CGR* 2, no. 3 (1984): 189-210; M. Darrol Bryant, [Response to J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology"], *CGR* 3, no. 1 (1985): 95-99; Gordon D. Kaufman, "To the Discussion on 'Mennonite Theology'," *CGR* 3, no. 1 (1985): 99-101. Cf. J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," *CGR* 6, no. 2 (1988): 119-45; A. James Reimer, "Toward Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *CGR* 6, no. 2 (1988): 147-59; Thomas Finger, [Reply to J. Denny Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity"], *CGR* 6, no. 2 (1988): 161-64; J. Denny Weaver, [Response to A. James Reimer and Thomas Finger], *CGR* 7.1 (1989): 74-79; Alain Epp Weaver, "Options in Postmodern Mennonite Theology," *CGR* 11, no.1 (1993): 65-76; and most recently, A. James Reimer, "Christian Theology Today: What Is at Stake?" *CGR* 26, no. 3 (2008): 4-26. Reimer's many essays on Mennonite theology have been collected as well in A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*, Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies 1 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001).

[5] In his *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora, 2000), J. Denny Weaver cites this consultation as "the first conference sanctioned by [Mennonite] denominational institutions specifically on systematic theology" (24).

[6] Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers 7 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984). Contributors include Marlin E. Miller, Marlin Jeschke, J. Denny Weaver, Thomas Finger, A. James Reimer, and Howard John Loewen.

[7] Although the consultation took place less than ten miles from my childhood home in nearby Mishawaka, Indiana.

today. My thesis is relatively straightforward: I suggest that, in an effort to find commonalities with other theological and religious traditions (often for legitimate reasons), we Mennonites have neglected to develop our own self-consciously *Mennonite* systematic theologies; thus, in our increasingly ecumenical and pluralistic context, we may be served best, paradoxically, by developing more radically particularistic, integral MSTs alongside the ecumenical and interreligious work already in progress.

A few words about how I will proceed are in order. First, I do not entertain directly some of the major questions raised in the early 1980s, namely whether MST is *possible* or whether MST is *desirable.* Although the influence of John Howard Yoder's decidedly unsystematic *ad hoc* approach to theologizing is still felt in many Mennonite circles and has much to commend it, I will simply assume an affirmative answer to these two particular questions.[8] Related to these questions is another that I will leave aside, namely the question of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology and whether the two are in conflict or concord.[9]

Second, although the terms "Mennonite" and "systematic theology" are themselves contested, I do not intend to weigh in on their "proper" definitions. Rather, since my goal is to offer a report on the state of the discipline of MST, I allow these terms to function as broadly and inclusively as they are used in the literature. Thus, I use "Mennonite" advisedly, though I trust not too heavy-handedly. My choice of this term as opposed to others—such as "Anabaptist"—is both practical and principled. Practically speaking, the debate over systematic theology in *The Conrad Grebel Review* from its inception proceeded largely by self-proclaimed Mennonites and was largely over specifically Mennonite theology.[10] Therefore, I simply have adopted a term already in use. From a more principled perspective, however, I sometimes fear that discussions of "Anabaptism" tend to downplay or ignore

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[8] Cf. Gerald W. Schlabach, "Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder's Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* [hereafter *MQR*] 71, no. 2 (1997): 305-309.

[9] For thoughtful essays on this question from varying standpoints see Ben C. Ollenburger, ed., *So Wide a Sea: Essays on Biblical and Systematic Theology*, Text-Reader Series 4 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991), including essays by Thomas Finger, Elmer A. Martens, A. James Reimer, Gordon D. Kaufman, Mary H. Schertz, Howard John Loewen, and Ben C. Ollenburger.

[10] See references in note 4 above.

the historical particularity of the Mennonite tradition in favor of ethical abstractions or core theological essentials.[11] While there may be a place for discussing the essentials of the "Anabaptist vision," that is not my intent here. Instead, I am interested in a rich and robust Mennonite theology. That said, I am open to including in the discussion near relatives to Mennonites, including Hutterites, Amish, and certain Brethren groups, not to mention the immediate forebears of the Mennonite tradition in the 16th century. My use of "Mennonite," then, is more or less synonymous with the more inclusive term currently in vogue: "Anabaptist-Mennonite."

The term "systematic theology" is even slipperier than "Mennonite." The 1983 essays typically defined systematic theology in regard to comprehensiveness, coherence, and the like. For example, in his essay in the *Explorations of Systematic Theology* volume, Thomas N. Finger reasons as follows:

> 'Systematic' is desirable insofar as it helps express the sort of *comprehensiveness* that Mennonites have always felt about our convictions: that they apply to all dimensions of experience. 'Systematic' can convey that there is coherence and continuity among God's works; and that because of this, real relationships exist among all dimensions of the cosmos. 'Systematic' Theology would then be the attempt to speak of such things in a coherent, orderly—rather than piecemeal—fashion.[12]

Finger resists understanding "systematic" in terms of an "academic striving for completeness,"[13] however, and thus argues that the challenge for Mennonites is to offer a comprehensive, holistic theology that does not thereby become totalizing.[14] In what follows, I adopt his description as a

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[11] See, e.g., Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2010), for which the back cover asks: "[W]hat does Anabaptism look like when not clothed in Mennonite or Amish traditions?"

[12] Thomas Finger, "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible from a Mennonite Perspective?" in *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley, 49; italics in original.

[13] Finger, "Systematic Theology," 49.

[14] Cf. A. James Reimer, "Mennonite Systematic Theology and the Problem of Comprehensiveness," in *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley, 57–82. Like Finger, Reimer writes that the "*raison d'etre* of all systematic

provisional, working definition of systematic theology.

Third and finally, while my goal is to provide a review of the field of MST over the past thirty years, I make no claim to offering an exhaustive treatment in respect of either breadth or depth. In regard to breadth, I delimit my discussion to six important texts taken to be representative of the trends that I describe.[15] In regard to depth, I focus my assessment of each text on the question of how—and to what extent—it appropriates the Mennonite tradition into its project, leaving aside other important considerations.

With those provisos in mind, I proceed as follows. First, I classify the MSTs produced over the last three decades into two waves, "anti-sectarian MST" and "dialogical MST" respectively. I then return to Jeschke's statement to ask whether it might be time for a third wave, "integral MST," offering tentative suggestions as to what such an integral MST might entail.

First Wave (1980s–1990s): Anti-Sectarian MST

The first wave spans roughly the 1980s and 1990s, and is marked by a seeming desire to make Mennonite theology ecumenically respectable and relevant by downplaying its supposed "sectarianism" and focusing instead on how it can and should be a theology for all Christians. In some ways this approach is entirely understandable, given the then prevailing view of Mennonites as the paradigmatic "sect type"—a hangover from the religio-sociological typologies of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and H. Richard Niebuhr—which often served as a convenient excuse for those from the "church type" to ignore or further marginalize Mennonite theology. The theologies in this wave seem dominated by the concern to emerge from

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theology is the passion for comprehensiveness" (57).

[15] A more comprehensive discussion would need to include, minimally, the treatments of the doctrine of atonement by John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1986); Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011); and Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). It might also include shorter works, such as Daniel Liechty's slender volume, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) [later republished as *Reflecting on Faith in a Post-Christian Time* with a foreword by Duane Friesen and responses by Christian Early, Marlin Jeschke, Michele Hershberger, and Brian McLaren (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2003)].

this primarily pejorative sectarian label. As a result, though these theologies are deeply rooted in basic Mennonite convictions, their indebtedness to Mennonite thought and life often remains implicit or is even explicitly downplayed. Indeed, though glancing references to an "Anabaptist," "Free Church," "Peace Church," "Believer's Church," or "Radical Reformation" approach can occasionally be found, more often these theologies simply go by the broader label "Christian."

Thomas Finger

Thomas N. Finger's two-volume *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, published in 1985 and 1987,[16] represents to my knowledge the first major systematic theology produced by a Mennonite in the 1980s. By writing his systematic theology in an eschatological key and focusing on the *kerygma* of the early church, Finger is arguably drawing on Mennonite themes. Nevertheless, though he writes about the significance of "Contextual Theologies,"[17] he neglects to say anything about the context from which he writes. Finger makes very few explicit references to Mennonite thinkers, including no entry for Menno Simons or Mennonites in his extensive index. In the introduction to his second volume, Finger does admit that "the believer's church experience influences our attempt to write theology from the perspective of active Christian communities," but he is quick to note that he does not "develop a sectarian theology, applicable only to historic believer's churches."[18]

C. Norman Kraus

C. Norman Kraus's *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* and *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode*, published in 1987 and 1991 respectively,[19] are slightly more explicit about their Anabaptist commitments than Finger's volumes. Kraus states from

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[16] Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985); vol. 2 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1987).

[17] See Finger, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1, 61–78.

[18] Finger, *Christian Theology*, vol. 2, 12.

[19] C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald, 1987); id., *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1991).

the outset that his work is "a 'peace theology' in the Anabaptist tradition,"[20] and throughout these volumes he makes repeated use of the theology of Menno Simons if not Mennonites *per se*. However, his aim is not so much a retrieval or exposition of the Mennonite tradition as a reinterpretation or correction of it for global, intercultural purposes. Having taught overseas for many years, Kraus appropriates Asian—particularly Japanese—perspectives for his own work. He writes: "For the Japanese church the conversation has proved fruitful, but I must hasten to explain that I have no illusions that my work is a 'Japanese theology.' At best it is a kind of bridge which I hope will help the Japanese to move beyond a repetition of the Western theological dialogue to a fresh examination of the scriptural tradition for themselves."[21] He thus makes it clear that his Christological approach "does not necessarily imply a sectarian or non-Trinitarian position."[22] So, though Kraus may be a bit more explicitly Anabaptist than Finger, his desire for his theology to be viewed as non-sectarian seems just as strong.

Indeed, though explicitly Anabaptist, Kraus appears ambivalent at best about the particularly Mennonite theology with which he was raised. He (perhaps rightly) describes "Anabaptist-Mennonites" as somewhat suspicious of theology,[23] and in his brief autobiographical reflections states that "[m]y own life pilgrimage has taken me across many cultural boundaries. I began in a sheltered Mennonite community where a naive commingling of biblical and Greek concepts provided the mold for theological thinking. My first introduction to Anabaptism was also within this 'orthodox' context."[24] But after traveling the world, Kraus "became aware that biblical presuppositions and definitions were not necessarily the same as those of my Mennonite biblicism."[25] Instead, he found that "our postmodern Western culture has growing similarities with the Asian cultures," which led him to hope that what he had written "may even help to bridge between the two cultural worlds."[26]

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[20] Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 17; 15-19; *God Our Savior*, 13-19.

[21] Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 18.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Kraus, *God Our Savior*, 13.

[24] Ibid., 17-18.

[25] Ibid., 19.

[26] Ibid.

Gordon Kaufman

If Kraus indicates movement toward a more explicitly Anabaptist—even if not strictly speaking Mennonite—theology, our final example, Gordon D. Kaufman's 1993 work, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*,[27] swings the pendulum far in the opposite direction. Rather than drawing from Mennonite or even the broader Christian tradition, Kaufman proposes "a full-scale reconception of Christian theology."[28] He does note that the position taken in his book expresses "four fundamental dimensions of my own faith and piety," which we might see as influenced in part by Mennonite theology, including:

> (a) my deep sense of the ultimate mystery of life; (b) my feeling of profound gratitude for the gift of humanness and the great diversity which it manifests; (c) my belief (with this diversity especially in mind) in the continuing importance of the central Christian moral demand that we love and care for not only our neighbors but even our enemies; and (d) my conviction (closely connected with this last point) that the principal Christian symbols continue to provide a significant resource for the orientation of human life.[29]

Beyond these somewhat vague Christian platitudes, however, Kaufman sets out to build "a framework which can accommodate many different religious (and secular) perspectives (so long as they are genuinely humanizing), and which permits the use of quite diverse mythical and metaphysical symbols (so long as they are recognized to be symbols and not reified)."[30] He admits that his "qualified" and "agnostic" stance may not be emotionally satisfying for many religious adherents, but he argues that it

> . . . provides a distinctive empowerment of its own: namely to

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[27] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993). See Reimer's analysis of Kaufman in "The Nature and Possibility of Mennonite Theology," *CGR* 1, no. 1 (1983): 33-55, reprinted in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (chapter 10).

[28] Ibid., ix.

[29] Ibid., xii. Cf. Gordon D. Kaufman, "My Life and My Theological Reflection: Two Central Themes," *CGR* 20, no. 1 (2002): 60-89.

[30] Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, xiii.

open ourselves to everything human, to every position and claim; to listen sympathetically to every kind of experience—Christian, communist, Buddhist, deconstructionist, radical feminist, Muslim, liberal humanist, Nazi; to search for the human in everyone. . . . This is an empowerment of radical inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness, an empowerment that encourages gratitude and respect for the humanity of every person and community, not only for those who happen to agree with us.[31]

Indeed, for Kaufman, the central theological sin can be summed up in a single word: parochialism. He writes that "all humans are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent in many ways; and . . . we dare not, therefore, continue to live and think simply in the limited terms which our much too parochial traditions have bequeathed us."[32] It should thus come as no surprise that mention of Kaufman's Mennonite heritage is completely absent from this work.

In sum, while Finger, Kraus, and Kaufman each have their own unique style and content, they all seem to share a similar motivation or impulse, namely to present their theology as not uniquely Mennonite but rather as broadly Christian or even global or pluralistic. They each disavow sectarianism or parochialism in theology, though their indebtedness to their Mennonite heritage remains visible in the questions they raise and their approaches to answering them.

Second Wave (2000s–present): Dialogical MST
Another generation removed from the "sectarian" charge—and no doubt benefiting from the pioneering work of the first wave—theologies of the second wave are less reserved about their Mennonite rootedness. Indeed, during this second wave we find the first systematic theologies to include in their titles

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., xv. Cf. ibid., 133: "For those of us for whom a global consciousness is beginning to take hold, *all particular and thus parochial religious and cultural and philosophical traditions are now outmoded and superseded to the extent that they cannot give an adequate or illuminating interpretation of our new historical situation, these new sociocultural facts about human life*"; italics in original. See also, ibid., 25, 26, 101, 110, 120, 122, 131-39, 312-21, 408, 468.

the word "Anabaptist" (though not yet "Mennonite"). Unlike the first wave, where explicit mention of Mennonite theologians or groups was sparse, here such references abound. Second wave theologians seem more confident and assertive about the contextual nature of their particular perspectives. Despite these differences, however, the second wave shares with the first an impulse to theologize primarily in interaction with other theologians and traditions, whether historic (Augustine, Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Molina) or contemporary (black, feminist, womanist, liberationist, neo-orthodox, evangelical). Putting Mennonite theology in dialogue with these other theologies creates possibilities for creative syntheses as well as challenges for traditional Mennonite ways of thought and practice. At the same time, such a dialogical mode risks distorting or truncating Mennonite theology by describing it in the categories of other theological traditions or narrowing it to its core essentials in order to compare and contrast it with these other traditions. These possibilities and risks are demonstrated by three major theologies of the second wave.

Thomas Finger (redux)
Approximately two decades after his two-volume *Christian Theology*, Thomas Finger returned in 2004 with his *magnum opus*, the six-hundred-page *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*,[33] which even its harsher critics admit is in a class of its own.[34] The overtly and pervasively Anabaptist character of *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* marks a decisive break from the first wave, including Finger's own earlier work. Nevertheless, as Finger himself freely concedes, his approach is driven largely by a desire "to show how Anabaptist insights can illumine issues of concern to evangelicals, mainline ecumenicals, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox."[35] With a hint of irony, he uses language that so troubled his

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[33] Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

[34] See, e.g., J. Denny Weaver, "Parsing Anabaptist Theology: A Review Essay of Thomas N. Finger's *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (2005): 241-63. Though quite critical of Finger's general approach, Weaver concedes that Finger's volume "is impressive for more than its size. . . . No similar book exists in the world of Anabaptist and Mennonite theology" (241).

[35] Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 103. See also Thomas N. Finger, "Response to J.

predecessors to describe his project: "I hope that my 'sectarian' tradition can make significant ecumenical contributions."[36]

While Finger certainly succeeds in demonstrating Anabaptism's "significant ecumenical contributions," doing so may come with certain tradeoffs. By continually putting Anabaptist theology in dialogue with other traditions in order to demonstrate the former's contribution to the latter, what results can be a slightly idiosyncratic form of Anabaptist theology. The idiosyncrasies can be seen by what Finger emphasizes. For instance, in their joint review of the book, Gayle Gerber Koontz and John Rempel note that "Finger's ecumenical interests press him to try to recover [the] language [of divinization] because it may be fruitful for inter-church understanding," particularly with Eastern Orthodox theology.[37] However, while the language of divinization serves an important ecumenical function for Finger—and can indeed be found in some Anabaptist sources—the reviewers conclude that "as Anabaptist-Mennonites have drawn from historical sources for their life and thought over the years, 'divinization' has not risen to the top. Finger emphasizes a term that most scholars and church members have left secondary."[38] Finger's idiosyncrasies can also be seen by what he omits. In an illuminating exposition, Timothy Paul Erdel describes his bewilderment over the omission in Finger's entire work of any meaningful discussion of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" and its significance for Anabaptist theology through

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Denny Weaver's 'Parsing Anabaptist Theology,'" *Direction* 35, no. 1 (2006): 134-53, especially 142: "My concerns connect more with . . . communicating the Anabaptist perspective to others. Anabaptists, in my view, have done so little theology over the centuries that we are almost entirely ignorant of this field and illiterate of its vocabulary. How can we explicate our implicit theology for others unless we at least learn their vocabularies? How can we communicate our perspective without asking how it lines up with their categories? I want not only to articulate this perspective for ourselves, but also to introduce it to a much larger ecclesial and scholarly world. I find it obvious that comparing our outlook with others can reveal differences, sometimes great differences, as well as similarities." Cf. Thomas N. Finger, "Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist," *CGR* 17, no. 2 (1999): 52-68.
[36] Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 103.
[37] Gayle Gerber Koontz and John Rempel, review of *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*, *MQR* 80, no. 4 (2006): 699.
[38] Ibid. This point is made forcefully as well in Weaver, "Parsing Anabaptist Theology," though cf. Finger, "Response to J. Denny Weaver's 'Parsing Anabaptist Theology.'"

the centuries.[39] While its importance for Mennonites can be overstated, the Sermon certainly merits some mention in a volume purporting to articulate Anabaptist theology with special attention to historical and biblical considerations.

Kirk MacGregor

Whereas Finger's work has gained wide recognition—both positive and negative—for its creative and original approach, another creative and original work, Kirk R. MacGregor's *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*,[40] unfortunately has gone largely unnoticed since its 2007 publication.[41] I suspect this is partly because MacGregor's stated intention of combining Molinist philosophical theology with Anabaptist practical theology is so idiosyncratic that it leaves both philosophical (Roman Catholic) theologians and practical (Anabaptist) theologians unsure of what do with the book as a whole. Indeed, though MacGregor promises a "Molinist-Anabaptist Synthesis" and cautions against "creating a false dichotomy between theory and application,"[42] ultimately his book falls into the classic "two list" model of theology, drawing from another tradition (in this case, Roman Catholic) for philosophical or systematic theology while leaning on Anabaptism for theological ethics. Thus, after a prolegomenal chapter, MacGregor spends four chapters on philosophical theology with almost no mention of Anabaptist theology[43] before concluding with four chapters of more practical

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[39] Timothy Paul Erdel, "Holiness among the Mennonites," *Reflections* 10 (2008): 13.

[40] Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2007).

[41] Though published in 2007, I have found only two reviews of the book to date: Thomas N. Finger's short one paragraph book notice in *Religious Studies Review* 35, no. 1 (2009): 39-40 and my own review in *MQR* 83, no. 4 (2009): 656-59. Note that MacGregor is writing from a Brethren background rather than a Mennonite one, strictly speaking. For a brief autobiographical sketch, see Kirk R. MacGregor, "Beyond Anselm: A Biblical and Evangelical Case for Nonviolent Atonement," in *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 356.

[42] MacGregor, *Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*, 60.

[43] Topics include "*Scientia Media* according to Molina, Not Arminius" (chap. 2), "A Molinist and Contra-openness Approach to Scriptural 'Anthropomorphisms'" (chap. 3), "The Coexistence of God and Genuinely Gratuitous Evil" (chap. 4), and "Theology Proper" (chap. 5).

import with little mention of Molinism.[44] Thus, while his work is the most explicitly dialogical of all the theologies surveyed thus far, the effect of his approach is to minimize Anabaptist theology to a couple of bare, practical essentials: church discipline and nonviolence. Other aspects of theology are left to more refined Roman Catholic theologians or evangelical analytic philosophers.

J. Denny Weaver

On the one hand, J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* is the most narrowly focused of any of the theologies considered thus far, centering on just one doctrine, the atonement.[45] On the other, the ramifications of this book are perhaps the most comprehensive and theologically revolutionary of any of them.[46] His project is no less than to develop a nonviolent theology based on his Mennonite tradition that will serve as a rival to classical orthodox theology or what he elsewhere calls "theology-in-general."[47] In this respect his book is arguably the most explicitly Mennonite of all the theologies we have surveyed.[48]

In his critique of Finger's work Weaver discusses two fundamental starting points for Mennonite theology: one that "seek[s] points of

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[44] Topics include "Inerrancy and the Importance of Reading Scripture Biblio-critically" (chap. 6), "The Sacraments and Church Discipline" (chap. 7), "Women in Ministry" (chap. 8), and "The Historical Jesus' Non-violent Yet Socially Revolutionary Conception of the Kingdom of God" (chap. 9). Arguably only chapters 7 and 9 deal explicitly with Anabaptism, and even here MacGregor departs from historic Anabaptist views or fails to consider them altogether.

[45] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011 [2001]).

[46] Weaver describes his project rather mildly as an attempt at "thinking out of the box" (*Nonviolent Atonement*, xi).

[47] Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, especially chapters 2 and 3; cf. J. Denny Weaver, "The General versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th-Century Mennonite Theologizing," *CGR* 17, no. 2 (1999): 28-51.

[48] Finger's *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* has roughly three and a half times as many references to Mennonites (75 as opposed to 21 in Weaver's *Nonviolent Atonement*), but aside from the fact that Finger's text is nearly twice as long as Weaver's, many of Finger's references to Mennonites are merely descriptive, whereas Weaver seems to want to identify with the Mennonite tradition more explicitly. See, e.g., Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 5-6: "For some years, I have been thinking about issues of violence and atonement from the pacifist perspective of the Mennonite tradition to which I choose to belong."

commonality with other traditions" and one that "locat[es] those points where Anabaptism differs from other traditions."[49] Weaver is critical of theologians such as Finger and Reimer who adopt the former methodological approach, while he invokes John Howard Yoder as a positive example of one who adopts the latter approach, which Weaver himself adopts in *The Nonviolent Atonement*.[50] However, while he views these approaches as polar opposites, they appear to be two sides of the same coin. Both end up describing Mennonite theology in terms of theologies external to it— either accommodating these theologies or reacting against them. Finger's *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* does the former, while Weaver's *Nonviolent Atonement* does the latter. Both approaches have largely the same effect: truncating Mennonite theology and turning it into little more than a few distinctive or essential features, such as—in Weaver's case—nonviolence and the perspective of the marginalized.

Indeed, while Weaver criticizes Finger and others for describing Mennonite theology too much in the terms of others, this seems to be precisely what Weaver does in *The Nonviolent Atonement*. After spending roughly the first third of the book laying out his Narrative Christus Victor model of the atonement, he spends roughly the second two-thirds putting his view in dialogue with other perspectives, principally black, feminist, and womanist views of the atonement.[51] It seems, ironically, that Weaver has taken the same approach that he criticized in Finger: describing Mennonite theology largely in terms of outside traditions. A good argument could be had over which traditions are more compatible with Mennonite theology— classical theology or contemporary contextual theologies.[52] But regardless

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[49] Weaver, "Parsing Anabaptist Theology," 257.

[50] Ibid., 257-58.

[51] Weaver begins his book thus: "Sharp debates about the death of Jesus sparked by feminist and womanist theologians remain on the cutting edge of discussions of Christology and atonement" (*Nonviolent Atonement*, 1). My observations are not meant to suggest that Mennonite theology is necessarily distinct from these contextual theologies. Cf., e.g., the following issues of *CGR* devoted to women's issues and perspectives: "Women in the Church," *CGR* 8, no. 3 (1990); "In a Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology," *CGR* 10, no. 1 (1992); "Wind and Fire: Anabaptist Women Doing Theology," *CGR* 14, no. 2 (1996); "Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating—Women Doing Theology 2003 Conference," *CGR* 23, no. 1 (2005).

[52] Another good debate could be had over whether classical theology and contemporary contextual theologies need be placed in opposition to each other.

of how that debate is settled, such differences should not obscure the fundamental methodological similarity between these dialogical theologies. Each describes Mennonite theology predominantly in terms of the traditions with which the author seeks to engage in dialogue. Moreover, in each case this leads not only to some fruitful exchange between traditions but to certain aspects of Mennonite theology being minimized or overemphasized, thus leaving a somewhat truncated picture of it as a whole.

Integral MST: A Third Wave?

We return now to Marlin Jeschke's 1983 statement with which we began: "One of the obvious things about Mennonite systematic theology is that we don't have one—at least in the usual professional sense of the term." Could Jeschke make this statement in 2013? Given our survey of six major, "professional" MSTs from the last thirty years—to which more could be added—it is certainly not *obvious* that we do not have a Mennonite systematic theology. However, if we take him to refer to the stronger, more explicit form of MST analogous to Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist systematic theologies, then it is equally not obvious that we do have one.

Thus, in light of the above discussion, I propose two counterintuitive claims. The first claim is this: In order to move beyond sectarianism, Mennonite theologians may need to stop worrying about being sectarian and to focus instead on simply being Mennonite. The second is like the first: The best way for Mennonite theologies to be dialogical and ecumenical going forward may be to stop trying so hard to be dialogical and ecumenical, and to focus instead on simply being Mennonite. These two related claims are not meant to be universally true principles—valid for all times and places— but rather to apply to the particular situation Mennonite theology finds itself in today.

What would a more integral MST look like? I do not presume to answer that question definitively or even satisfactorily. (I suspect a proper answer cannot be given until actual attempts at developing integral MSTs have been made.) Nevertheless, my inclination is to see integral MST as more about a way of doing theology than about the specific conclusions one reaches. Indeed, it might be argued that reifying conclusions is often what leads to problems. Thus, in conclusion I venture to offer only some tentative,

general strategies or directions for developing a more integral MST. From my admittedly limited reading of the tradition, I suggest that a coherent way of moving forward with integral MST will involve the following elements.

First, integral MST will be thoroughly rooted in Scripture as its pre-eminent norm. It thus will not be embarrassed by the particularity of the biblical story of God's working in the world with and through Israel, Jesus, and the church. At the same time, it will avoid "flattening" Scripture and will not be ashamed to admit of a distinct Mennonite hermeneutic that emphasizes the life and teachings of Jesus as the high point of biblical revelation.[53] While not ignoring the rest of Scripture or falling prey to our sometimes Marcionite tendencies, integral MST—as with integral Mennonite faith and practice—will be formed and informed by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, integral MST will be rooted in the great Christian tradition, though with a few caveats. For one, in order to be reasonably independent, integral MST will need to sit lightly with respect to any particular theologian or theological movement within the great tradition. Thus, it will assume neither commonality nor tension with particular pre- or non-Mennonite theologies from the outset. Instead, it will begin with the particular Mennonite stream of the great tradition and see what other theologians or theological traditions are appealed to, ignored, or denounced from within that stream. Indeed, just as doing Mennonite theology with ecumenical or

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[53] The question of Mennonite biblical hermeneutics is much too daunting to be addressed with any nuance here. For perspectives on this topic, see William Klassen, "Anabaptist Hermeneutics: The Letter and the Spirit," *MQR* 40, no. 2 (1966): 83-96; John Howard Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," *MQR* 41, no. 4 (1967): 291-308; C. Norman Kraus, "American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750–1950," *MQR* 41, no. 4 (1967): 309-29; Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience: A Study of Anabaptist Hermeneutics," *Direction* 6, no. 2 (1977) 19-31; William M. Swartley, ed., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, Text-Reader Series 1 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984); John D. Roth, "Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics," in *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present*, edited by Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker (Bridgewater, VA: Penobscot, 1995), 51-64; Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, Studies in the Believers Church Tradition, 3 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000); David C. Cramer, "Evangelical Hermeneutics, Anabaptist Ethics: John Howard Yoder, the *Solas*, and the Question of War," in *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 379-405.

dialogical concerns at the forefront can skew Mennonite theology, so can doing it while consciously trying to ignore other traditions. The latter would lead to an ahistorical abstraction since, as we have seen, Mennonites have always done theology in conversation with other traditions.

Integral MST, therefore, will begin its theological inquiry—after the Bible—with its own confessions and theologians, from the Schleitheim, Kempen, and Dordrecht Confessions,[54] to the writings of Balthasar Hubmaier, Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, Melchior Hoffman, Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, Peter Riedemann, and Dirk Philips in the 16th century,[55] to Daniel Kauffman, Harold Bender, J. C. Wenger, John Howard Yoder, Gordon Kaufman, John Driver, C. Norman Kraus, A. James Reimer, Thomas N. Finger, and J. Denny Weaver in the 20th—as well as many more in between.[56] For this reason, it actually may be an advantage that Mennonites have resisted writing integral MSTs for so long. As we have seen, earlier waves of theologians were writing theology *as* Mennonites rather than writing self-consciously Mennonite theology *per se*. As such, they may have been able to take creative license with the Mennonite tradition in ways that a more integral MST may not have done. While I have argued that this at times produced distortions in various directions, it also produced creative material that now can be incorporated into the Mennonite theological tradition. And if we follow Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of tradition as "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined,"[57] then we can see these examples of theology

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[54] For translations of these and other early Anabaptist confessions, see Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660*, Classics of the Radical Reformation 11 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006).

[55] See, e.g., H. Wayne Pipkin, ed., *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, Text Reader Series 5 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994).

[56] This proposal might be read as a modified form of what J. Denny Weaver offers as a "theoretical possibility, a[n] … approach to an Anabaptist theology [that] construct[s] theology entirely of material written by Anabaptists" ("Parsing Anabaptist Theology," 243). I would replace "constructs theology entirely of " by "begins theological inquiry with."

[57] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]), 222: "[W]hen a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose."

by Mennonites as contributing to—rather than moving away from—the ongoing Mennonite theological tradition.

At its most basic level, of course, Mennonite theology just is theology done by Mennonites. Calling for a new approach to MST thus in no way discounts or rejects the contributions of earlier approaches. Moreover, given the polygenetic, multivalent character of the Mennonite tradition, integral MST will need to be open to hearing from a diversity of perspectives within the tradition, including those previously marginalized, such as Mennonite women and Latin American theologians. It is thus probably just as accurate to speak of MSTs in the plural as is in the singular.

Thirdly, integral MSTs will make recourse to reasoned argumentation without thereby becoming rationalistic. Rather than beginning with foundational, universal first principles, Mennonite theologians will recognize the historical particularity of all forms of reasoning and will be unembarrassed by our inability to persuade others with different starting points than ours. To cite MacIntyre again, Mennonite theologians will allow that "all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition."[58] In other words, they will welcome what has come to be called "traditioned reason." While freely making recourse to good argumentation, integral MSTs will be cautious about attempts at developing natural or fundamental theologies, choosing instead to "lay no other foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ," as the verse that became Menno's life motto states.[59]

Finally, integral MSTs will be keenly sensitive to the place of experience for theology.[60] Mennonite theologians will understand the term "experience"

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[58] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222. Cf. John Howard Yoder, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Christian E. Early and Ted G. Grimsrud (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

[59] That is, 1 Corinthians 3:11. Indeed, "Every book and every little pamphlet he wrote have on the front page [this] motto" (*Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Menno Simons (1496–1561)" [by Cornelius Krahn and Cornelius J. Dyck], www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4636ME.html [accessed 30 April 2012]).

[60] I am utilizing the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in my conclusion, though with a distinctly Mennonite twist. United Methodist theologian Albert C. Outler, who coined the term, writes that the Quadrilateral allows for theologizing that is both "eclectic and pluralistic" and "coherent, stable, whole," thus enabling one to avoid "the barren extremes of 'dogmatism,'

broadly to include both the personal and the communal.[61] Therefore, MSTs will be contextual, shaped by one's particular life experiences, but at the same time corporate, shaped by the collective experiences of one's community and by the experiences of Mennonites around the world and throughout the centuries.[62] After all, it is not without good reason that the most important book for Mennonites—after the Bible—is the *Martyrs Mirror*.[63]

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