Teaching Christian History in Seminary: A Declension Story

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Introduction

Do good theology and good pastoring necessarily require deep interest in the Church's history? A low view of Christian history has long been a free church affliction, apparently due to an exaggerated belief in the sole authority of Scripture. When scholars in my circle recently began talking about a "usable" history, I soon realized this discussion was not really about history. Rather, it was a theological misuse of history, an effort to achieve theological certainty where the history referred to fits the desired theology.

Christian history is about the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church – the "body of Christ" as the primary New Testament image – for which Christ gave himself. Sending the flawed human individuals making up the body of Christ into the world as ambassadors of the good news was a divine risk, done with a "sending" of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide that motley crew of humans "into all truth," to pick one of Jesus' descriptors for the Spirit's role in Christian history. It has proved very tempting to select out a usable "exceptional" chosen people to present a story line more easily seen as Holy Spirit-guided. So, I have often started a Christian history class with the question, Do you love the Church?, in order to start probing the light and shadow sides of the story.

This reflection on teaching history in a seminary is shaped by the conclusion I have come to that the troubling legacy of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, as seems true of most free churches, is that we do not love the Church and do not believe the Holy Spirit led it into all truth, except for our small part of the story, properly sanitized. This statement is a deliberately provocative way of posing the issue of teaching Christian history, and indicates the central ecumenical problem Christians have struggled with. The anxiety in Jesus' high priestly prayer – "that they may be one, so that the world may believe" – underlines what was and still is at stake. It also points to the intimate link between Christian history and mission. Those

areas of my scholarship – history and mission – were already in serious crisis when I settled on a history major in college. Their decline has continued. In what follows I limit myself to illustrating the challenge of teaching Christian history at a Mennonite seminary.

Sitz im Leben: The Scholar's and the Denomination's

My reflections include matters common to most historians of Christianity, but they have also been deeply shaped by my own context (*Sitz im Leben*) as part of the free church tradition. This tradition is statistically much larger than historians until recently have noticed because of its quite undisciplined plurality of expressions in the cultures of the world. Further, my thinking has developed as part of a relatively insignificant minority tradition, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition of the past 500 years, which became global only in my lifetime. Years ago I had set out to do doctoral studies in history, drawing extensively on the social science disciplines and social theory, with the intention of helping my church community find its way forward. In the end I settled on Russian Mennonite history as a specialization, but in my dissertation on early 19th-century Russian history, my findings on the Russian Mennonites were but a minor section of a bigger story, namely one about the Pietist Reformation in its Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant expressions that were shaping the social, political, and cultural life of tsarist Russia.[1] By then, too, several articles by me on Russian Mennonites in the 20th century had appeared in Mennonite journals, based on research in London, England and resources in the USSR. In a book published a half-dozen years later, the Russian and Soviet Mennonite story got integrated into a larger story of the role of evangelicals in the dramatic modernization experiments of the 20th century.[2]

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[1] I already knew before starting graduate school that the Russian Mennonite story I had learned was too self-congratulatory. It was being told from the inside, and even there puzzling aspects seemed unexplored. My actual dissertation focus was to write a biography of a key state official as a way to examine the broad social, political, and religious developments of the first quarter of the 19th century, a major reforming of the Russian Empire on the way to modernization, within which the Mennonite settlers formed their distinct story. The dissertation was titled "Prince Alexander N. Golitsyn 1773-1844: Tsarist Minister of Piety" (University of Minnesota, unpublished, 1976).

[2] Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981).

When at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in 1985-87, I taught Mennonite history, church and state in Europe and Soviet Russia, and a course on the Christian encounter with the many faces of Marxism. All were electives but attracted strong enrolment, perhaps because I was the strange new professor who knew the Soviet Union. Perhaps more puzzling was the fact that students from the Marxism and Christianity class decided to meet for further discussion at the beginning of the next semester. Today I would be astonished if a student knew anything about Marxism. Yet I still find the Marxist challenge to Christianity profoundly relevant and troubling.

When I returned to AMBS in 1990, I was asked to teach many of the general history courses, while remaining deeply involved in the post-communist world as an East-West consultant and research scholar sponsored by MCC.[3] Initially, students were still likely to take four courses in general Christian history, and I offered about 10 history courses over a three-year rotation, but that ended when a more restrictive curriculum went into effect after 1994. When around 1996 I became the editor of both the ecumenical journal *Religion in Eastern Europe* (as part of my MCC work) and *Mission Focus: Annual Review,* my annual load of history or mission courses dropped to three. Those editing tasks have preoccupied me ever since and have acquainted me with a wider world of committed believers and scholars who often made me think again. Not only had I embraced the label of Mennonite historian and church historian, I had also become an ecumenical theologian and missiologist. Below I will concentrate on specific challenges to teaching history in the Mennonite setting, but I realize that colleagues and friends do not regard the fields of history, theology, and missiology as necessarily interlocking, as I have come to perceive them, given my extra-seminary life.

The book took on a second life when published in 1996 in Russian and is still used in schools in digital format (English and Russian). Through a Canada Council doctoral grant I was able to spend several months in successive years, exploring archival materials on religion in Leningrad and Moscow, and had begun, as a research scholar, a Mennonite Central Committee sponsored assignment at a research center newly established in London, England (1973-76) at what was known until recently as Keston Institute.

[3] Aside from coordinating the completion of a multi-volume Bible commentary in Russian translation project and a new oral history project involving students from four theological colleges, that East/West consultant work focused on teaching history at many of the new theological schools, soon engaging and encouraging a new generation of Russian evangelical scholars.

Teaching history in a western free church seminary has become increasingly difficult over the century-and-a-half that seminaries have existed in North America. Not only has the United States been driven by an exceptionalist mythology; until recently historiography on American Christianity was essentially organized around Anglo-American Protestantism from Puritan roots to the many varieties of Evangelicalism. The skeleton in the historical closet, so one prominent historian once put it, was the immigrant and his/her God.[4] That is, even the largest organized Christian body, the Roman Catholics, had to take on the sociological trappings of democratized revivalism in order to fit in.[5] Even now, the variety of lived Christianities, including the Mennonite ones, that immigrants brought to North America, where they went through further transformations during the cultural adaptation process, remain more unexamined than known. The cultural preference for ignoring the past and "moving forward," and for ignoring free church and Mennonite histories in particular, is why the current popularity of "Anabaptist theology" – of a dehistoricized, culturally neutral "naked Anabaptism" – makes any sense.

Teaching in the post-Communist world after 1991 made me contrast my North American context to a Soviet society both deeply interested in its past and very ignorant of its Christian story due to 70 years of limited access to written historical sources. The new Protestant (mainly Evangelical) theological schools were peopled mostly by teachers from Germany, Britain, and America. Those from the latter two countries represented worlds where Protestantism was predominant, and where the 20th century had marked an expanded cultural and political influence of the free churches, notably the many denominations of Baptists and Pentecostals, whose historical trajectories were more closely linked to the Mennonites. Teaching as if free church Protestants shape the world around them – the point of reference for British and American visiting professors – was noticed by Russian students keenly aware of their nation's long tradition of societal hostility to sectarians.

[4] Jay P. Dolan, "The Immigrants and Their Gods: A New Perspective on American Religious History," *Church History* 57, no. 1 (March 1988): 61-72. By 1980 around 40 percent of the American population had German origins, and those of British origin were already a smaller minority.

[5] For example, Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830-1900* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1978).

I also realized how much more my American students were surrounded by Anglo-American points of reference, Mennonites included. The non-English continental European renewal movements that had shaped and re-shaped the thinking and practice of Mennonites in Russia and Germany, including their intertwining with Baptists, Brethren, and Pietists, were better recognized by some of the more recent Mennonite migrants to Canada and the US than by those living for generations on the US eastern seaboard or even in the midwest.

Teaching the Tradition

In an apparent effort, around the year 2000, to re-direct attention in American seminaries to the Christian tradition, several seminaries (AMBS included) participated in a grant-funded seminar series. One exercise was for each faculty member at my seminary to write a two-page statement of how they taught the Tradition.[6] As I read the statements of my colleagues, whose specializations were Biblical studies, ministry praxis, ethics, or theology, what struck me was how "the tradition" was limited to notions about early Christianity and about early Anabaptism. It was a theology of beginnings. However, fundamental to the historian is the challenge of engaging a living tradition for the sake of the future.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is part of the Western Christian tradition. Walter Klaassen wrote a short book entitled *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* as a way to delineate the essential features of that tradition. Several years later he published a corrective essay in which he emphasized how the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is *both* Catholic *and* Protestant. Though that essay is included in the later editions by Pandora Press, in the popular understanding of many AMBS alumni the neither/nor formulation seems to have prevailed.[7] A variation on expressing that separatist understanding of the Anabaptist tradition is the notion of a third way – now popular through the Third Way Café website. I have come to see that Klaassen's readers should have been much more sensitive to the Catholic-

[6] I follow here the convention that "Tradition" capitalized refers to the Christian Tradition as a whole, and "tradition" to smaller parts of it.

[7] Originally Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973); now 3rd ed. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

Protestant cultural dynamic for nation building in Canada that accounted for Klaassen's rhetorical device at the time. I have concluded that neither "Catholic" nor "Protestant" were meaningful categories to encapsulate the various traditions, except as straw figures without historical development. Rather, they served to set up categories of comparison that rendered the Anabaptist tradition as dynamic and unique.

To stimulate a rethinking of their theology, I had students read two journal articles. One was "Rerooting the Faith . . . ,"[8] Scott Hendrix's attempt to explain how he taught Reformation history. The many Reformation traditions that emerged in the 16th century had ended up teaching "the tradition" as if their own *part* of it was *all* of it, an exercise that not only involved seriously misrepresenting other traditions but resulted in forgetting what the Reformation project was about – namely to re-root the Christian tradition, to reform and renew by testing present practice against long tradition, and to recover the original essence or intention. The many Protestant and Catholic reformation traditions had each opted for particular aspects of Christian living and thinking that they gave priority, such as grace (*sola gratia*) versus misuse of indulgences, or the witness of good works versus mere forensic notions of justification, or *sola fidei* versus Pelagianism, and they differed on appropriate strategies for reform.

My own understanding of these traditions sees the renewal movements usually referred to as 18th-century continental Pietism and Anglo-American Evangelicalism as another major round of re-rooting the faith, which in the process again spawned new Protestant traditions such as those of the Methodists, Brethren, and others. The latter traditions eventually got their own historians, but too often the earlier confessional bodies were not seen to have participated in that new round of re-rooting in their own way.[9] Yet

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[8] Scott Hendrix, "Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization," *Church History* 69, no. 3 (September 2000): 558-77; revised from *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 21 (2000): 63-80.

[9] For knowledgeable Mennonite readers, I might point to Robert Friedman's thesis contrasting Anabaptism with harmful Pietism, as if it were about choosing theologies to follow rather than seeing traditions participating in changing contexts and being transformed by them. Only a rigid adherence to a theology of beginnings could take the thesis seriously, and thankfully Friedman's *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949) offers rare and valuable data on Mennonite involvement in continental Pietism.

another phase of renewing and re-rooting resulted in what is now spoken of as the Third Wave or the Charismatic Reformations of the 20th century. Making sense of much of the global Mennonite world by the year 2000 requires examining how, and how much, Mennonites were re-shaped by those movements.[10]

The second assigned reading, usually the first task in a course on Eastern Christianity, was "'Tradition' in Eastern Orthodox Thought" by Greek Orthodox ethicist Stanley Harakas.[11] Invariably, students commented on the degree to which they had lacked much sense of tradition and now expressed an appreciation for the living tradition of Christianity. Harakas's composite definition (drawn from many sources, not only Orthodox) saw Tradition as "the activity of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of the Church." This is not only a more comprehensive understanding of Tradition than just an appeal to the authority of either Scripture or Tradition (later followed by appeals to the authority of Reason and Experience). Irenaeus's remark that "where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is . . ." must be understood in this sense. It pre-dated the time when "outside the Church is no salvation" came to be an authority claim for one Christian tradition, most often the Roman Catholic. In resisting papal supremacy claims, too often we ignore the truth that indeed there is no salvation outside the Church.

In broadest terms, I now attempt to teach the Tradition by seeking more ways to notice "the activity of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of the Church" with the assumption that this will be richly diverse but never

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[10] See Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), a provocative and surely controversial argument for the consequences over a 500-year trajectory of central emphases of the 16th-century Reformation. Gregory argues that the authority of Church Tradition was rejected by virtually all reformers in favor of an insistence on scripture alone, yet "the wide range of incompatible truth claims that a shared commitment to *sola scriptura* produced" (95) we now view as a dizzying harvest of pluralist notions. Similarly, the confessionalization era that followed resulted in a permanence of a multi-confessional Christianity that explains the modern penchant, especially in North America, to prioritize denominational defensiveness over Christian unity, and accounts for the loss of credibility of the confessions among the general public. Even so, the Tradition was always bigger than the Latin Western Christianity that Gregory maintains as exclusive focus.

[11] "'Tradition' in Eastern Orthodox Thought," *Christian Scholar's Review* 22, no. 2 (1992): 144-65.

disconnected from the historical continuity of the whole. It means that teaching the Tradition as if primitive Christianity (to the very limited extent we know it from New Testament and patristic sources) and Anabaptist renewal announcements in the 16th century are the primary criteria of authenticity is simply inadequate, and it is a sectarian approach that cannot offer enough understanding of the *Missio Dei*. Additionally it means that teaching from a global perspective today requires recognizing the power and limits of the westernization and modernization project of the last half-millennium, in particular seeing that Anabaptist renewal, even in today's de-historicized ideological form, is inherently Western and limited.

A curious trend in missiological, theological, and even some Mennonite historical writing is a focus on identifying a "Christendom" mindset as a central primary problem, best addressed by learning habits of piety from pre-Christendom. The world is already in a post-Christendom mentality, and for Christians to flourish or even survive, breaking with Christendom is assumed to be the key. At first glance, this tri-partite frame for summarizing Christian history seems preferable to fostering exclusivist claims for one's own Reformation tradition. Yet the more I have learned about the Christian story, the more this image of Christendom has become a barrier to understanding, for it assigns a major part of Christian history to apostasy, refusing to see the role of the Holy Spirit in that part of the story, except for one's own remnant. This form of thinking had emerged among numerous Anabaptist leaders after the first generation who were seeking a spiritual link to apostolic succession.[12] It has now taken on the status of theological partisanship, recent writers challenging John Howard Yoder's persistent use of the fall of the church or of Constantinianism as an ideal type.[13]

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[12] So the argument of Geoffrey Dipple, "*Just as in the Time of the Apostles*"*: Uses of History in the Radical Reformation* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005). The Reformation era, more broadly, forced both historical research and theoretical reflection, gradually developing from very partisan concepts of Christian history to what is now named a "global perspective" or "ecumenical approach" to history. See below.

[13] See the article series in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 4 (October 2011): 547-656, debating theologian (not really historian) Peter J. Leithart's book, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). The general thrust is to try to read Leithart carefully and to defend Yoder through

However, new studies of the Christendom era help us differentiate more carefully. Instead of listing key features of faithful early Christian practice that came under governmental control soon after Constantine, even the English language scholarly literature now conveys the great variety of ways that Christianity developed as it was translated into many cultures, including ways of resisting or subverting governmental interference in matters of faith. The Yoderian Constantinianism could at best be applied to some parts of the late feudal order of western Europe – perhaps between 1300 and 1700, to be generous. But eastern Byzantine Christianity followed a different formation in the relationship between emperor and patriarchs, not least because almost as soon as Islam emerged, the Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandrian patriarchates sank into tolerated ethnic minority status under the Caliphates. Nevertheless, Christian leaders both resisted and sought creative survival approaches that help account for the persistence of ancient churches to the present.[14] Throughout most of Christianity's first millennium, a major wing – and a very missionary one at that – developed in Asia from Edessa in Syria to India and beyond, under imperial regimes that were not Christian.[15] Contemplating those ways of living and bearing witness in medieval and modern eras is suggestively richer than looking in early Christianity for clues for living today. The current artifice of critiquing American Christianity as prisoner to Christendom thinking obscures more than it helps identify the particular contextual problems of Christian history in North America, which are not easily compared to those of most other continents.

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various mild revisions, but it remains limited to a particular view of Anabaptist theology, not even a broadly Mennonite theological spectrum. Nor do Leithart or his critics seriously examine the Christendom era historically. (*Leithart's book is reviewed in this issue. – Ed.*)

[14]An excellent summary of much research that my students have found very enlightening is Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008).

[15] A broadly informed survey, with current bibliographical suggestions, is Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement. Vol. 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Completing the second volume (1453 to the present) has proved difficult, given the complexity and wealth of scholarship, but drafts of many chapters do include much new literature, suggesting this volume may come closest to a serious global history.

Teaching the Tradition with Critical Engagement

I regard the effort to recover (or even to discover) the capacity to think historically as fundamental to being true to Christianity, for it is a historical religion. It claims that God entered into human history, especially in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and this gives history meaning to a degree not evident in other religions. Yet Mennonite seminarians at AMBS and at other free church seminaries commonly receive an MDiv degree without gaining a critical overview of church history in its broad sweeping developments, of Christian history in North America, or of the Mennonite tradition.[16] This has been our way of saying that much of that general history, or of more modern history, does not matter because we do not identify with it anyway when working theologically and pastorally.

When starting at AMBS in 1990, I had to critically assess the work of scholars outside my specialty to determine where general interpretations had shifted since my graduate studies before 1975. That assessment produced a series of questions that still guide my teaching today: Why should Christian history be conceived primarily in terms of institutions and ideas? Why should the church-state dichotomy, as it came to be understood in Western Christianity, be so central that Anabaptist-Mennonites saw the Constantinian conversion and consequent Constantinian era almost exclusively in church-state terms (and rejected the apparent outcome), and learned to think of dominant Christianity during the next thousand years as suspended in a state of apostasy? Realizing the inadequacy of many textbooks, I encouraged students to undertake more selective reading instead. I also wondered when a Mennonite scholar could or should attempt a published synthesis of the Christian story, and what difference it would make to Mennonite theologizing.

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[16] In recent decades many AMBS students met their history requirements with a required course on Anabaptist History and Theology (a 16th-century focus) and History of Christian Spirituality (usually conceived as reading the writings of the mystics, Catholic and Protestant). The type of theological probing for which the courses discussed below provide illustration happened with fewer students, as other curricular requirements reduced those electives in significance. The corrective I have advocated was not to increase history course requirements, but rather to convey how the predominance of other disciplines than the social-historical fosters a mindset where future pastors are expected to theologize from a smattering of knowledge.

How does one offer a historical foundation that works with recent commitments to women's concerns, worship and art, spirituality (private and corporate), preaching, or simply the history of God's people? Those issues and many more filled my course syllabi to the degree that many classic texts were reduced to their proper place, for example, to contrast elitist (largely monastic) writing with other faith expressions of the time.[17]

Teaching the Tradition to Mennonite and Other Students

My syllabus is normally the first introduction of my intention that students be theological when thinking historically, and that they notice the conceptualizations, the intellectual frameworks, within which historical information must be placed. I encourage them to read widely and comparatively with some of the above questions in mind, to notice what particular historians are speaking to, or what they appear to miss. Seminary students who thought they knew Mennonite history from a college class often say at the end of the course that their most surprising discovery was how little they knew, how narrowly focused and unphilosophical or theologically uncritical their understanding had been.

My approach in that course is to compare the known with the unknown, and to avoid making it a celebration of the developments of the Mennonite denominations that sponsor AMBS, since the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is much bigger. This includes offering alternatives to the presupposition that the definitive descriptors of Anabaptism and of the Mennonites were published by Herald Press. It includes reading materials from leaders and from the marginalized, and offering distinctions between what the Anabaptist movement was and what its legacy is. Above all, it seeks to foster attention to how living and thinking the Tradition proceeded over the centuries, how it was translated across many cultures, the fruit of which now confronts us with global perspectives and Mennonite responsibilities

[17] Observing recent theology doctoral graduates in their references to a historical past, I found it often seemed as if the historical background reading that their theology professors had done was the baseline for these students' grasp of Christian historiography. That generational lag for new theologians lacking a baseline in contemporary historiography for their theological work seems to be the fruit of disciplinary fragmentation, as well as of American culture's dismissive attitude to its own and others' history.

toward Christian unity in the face of a bewildering array of denominations with global pretensions.[18]

Even within the Mennonite world, I find it troubling that the majority of church communities emerging out of the deep testing of their faith in the USSR, who are now so energized in all spheres of ministry, no longer wish to be officially linked with Mennonite World Conference. Renewing the conversations with them requires deeper understanding about how this could have happened. The way the Russian Mennonite sense of heritage was sustained during the time of testing did not include a recovery of the 16th-century Anabaptist vision. Their subsequent celebration of a Menno Simons 500th anniversary in 1994, with an eye to reviewing their longer story, was linked mainly to the Dutch and Russian contexts. Most instructive too are articles in a new volume by international Mennonite Brethren scholars on the occasion of their 150th anniversary, particularly Alfredo Neufeld's keynote speech highlighting the common and the particular in the many historical trajectories of the Mennonite Brethren.[19]

The 50th anniversary celebrations of Harold S. Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" statement, held in Goshen in October 1994, caused me to ponder some contrasts. Observing which Mennonite traditions were best represented at the event, and the relative absence (and silence of those present) of Mennonite scholars from the North European (Dutch-Russian) tradition, I was struck by how alien or excluded I felt, a feeling already triggered by how the topics and papers were formulated. Both Irvin Horst and J. Denny Weaver, for example, argued for Bender's Vision statement as a necessary ideological (or teaching) tool. Weaver's failure to consider other than Old Mennonite experience as point of reference, plus his cavalier dismissal of

[18] For a number of years, a nearly complete book manuscript draft of that course, titled "Mennonite History in Global Perspective," has served as a *de facto* orienting text. Its soon publication may assist readers of this paper to catch some of the lines of historical development emphasized there, which are mostly available so far in scattered articles either by me or by the many other scholars whose findings I have sought to integrate.

[19] See Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht, eds., *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections After 150 Years* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2011), as well as Abe J. Dueck, ed., *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years* (Winnipeg, MB and Kitchener, ON: Kindred Productions and Pandora Press, 2010).

much of Christianity after the Constantinian conversion and his challenging the authority of the four ecumenical councils because they were a product of Constantinianism, made me conclude he was implicitly rejecting as nearly sub-Christian all but an Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Given how much more those attending should have known of developments since 313, his paper could not serve as a serious basis for theologizing.

In contrast, Mario Higueros of SEMILLA (Seminario Anabautista Latinoamerica), which provides theological education for Mennonite leaders in Central America from a Guatemala campus, had hardly spoken three paragraphs before I began noting his references to suffering, a relationship to the living Christ, hope, and a theology of The Way. This was the first time I heard these themes referred to at the conference as essential context for thinking – something I might have predicted from a Central American. These were the very themes around which I first learned about the Anabaptist experience, and how I continue to see it in Eastern Europe and globally where the Anabaptist heritage seems helpful. The structure of the conference kept us stuck in a sectarian celebration of history mode. That world of discourse excluded much, and seemed uninterested in what the world outside Mennonite Christianity in North America might be thinking.

How should I teach inclusively for Mennonites and other students? This has become an ever more urgent question. By the early 1990s, teaching church history globally and comparatively was already a common theme among historians. The better model was to see from many points of view.[20] Even one's denominational history should be presented in a comparative way that assumes that outsiders from another Christian family will appreciate it and that their critiques will be noted.

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[20] See Justo L. Gonzalez, "Globalization in the Teaching of Church History," *ATS Theological Education* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 49-72, in which he engages in a frank assessment of the weaknesses of his own work from the perspective of globalization, trying to identify what more inclusive foci should be. Since the publication of Timothy J. Wengert and Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., eds., *Telling the Churches' Stories: Ecumenical Perspectives in Writing Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), I have regularly presented as a minimum list the 14 principles for writing Christian history in an ecumenical perspective that Wengert and Brockwell summarize. Then I urge students to read more of the essays, most of which observe why this requires thinking from a global perspective. Doing that well is of course most difficult, but noticing the attempt to do so is what matters.

To teach Christianity historically is to notice almost constantly the challenge of translating the Gospel within a dynamically changing culture and across cultures. Further, the wholism of learning needs to speak to heart, mind, and soul. My "Nonviolence and Christian Faith in the 20th Century" course thus involved video clips, memoirs, poetry, songs, and comparative readings. It probed the impact of Christian complicity in the Holocaust, and the deep testing, including massive martyrdoms in the Soviet and Chinese communist experiments, as background for seeking to account for the nonviolent revolutions of 1989, the processes (actual and failed) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa, Chile, Germany, Russia, and so on. It also asked why Mennonite social ethics discourse has said so little about events that affected so many Mennonites.

On Truly Engaging Historical and Theological Traditions

A recent round of discourse on theological education is mirrored in the core values appearing in my seminary's recent vision statement, none of which include thinking historically.[21] Six educational goals for an M. Div degree as now assessed by the accrediting association contain, as the second aim, to "engage [the students'] historical and theological traditions in the context of the larger Christian church." Earlier core values statements made more specific references to history. What the new, shorter statements convey is catch phrases that could point to the substance of "Scripture, theology and ministry" (core value one), depending on the orientation and emphases of professors and courses.

Given the current climate of discourse, however, at least three crucial seminary educational goals were no longer specified, particularly in curricular expectation statements. One was the importance of globalization for theological education, so that a pastor and other church leaders can attempt a constructive critique of the many forms of globalization, because it matters in every congregation. A second was an explicit interweaving of mission and ecclesiology as essential to the missional church agenda. As for the third, as numerous secular sociologists have contended over the past decade, churches are one of the few social entities still functioning in

[21] This reference to AMBS is to my specific setting, yet it appears to reflect similar thinking in sister Mennonite seminaries in North America.

a pervasive climate of individualist atomization. So, church leaders have a special duty to be keepers of the social memory. Stated in more churchly terms, a crucial seminary task in such an individualized North America is to enable pastors and other leaders for perpetual, engaged conversation with the Tradition.

During a theological education consultation preceding the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Asuncion in 2009, I noted that many more schools are working at leadership formation across Latin America than in North America. Deep commitment by teachers and leaders was what they all had in common, yet contexts, approaches, and problems differed greatly. We sensed deep theological tensions (within the Latin American Mennonite world of educators) by the careful way presenters spoke, and I learned more from backgrounders during personal conversations. How much was this a deep sharing involving the North American theological educators who were present, I wondered. There were linguistic barriers to such sharing, but also the barriers of mission traditions still competing rather than working jointly with appropriate compromises.[22]

The current staffing and agenda shifts in Mennonite publishing companies, and in other key Mennonite institutions, make me ponder why the literature on Mennonite history has declined, why popular summaries of the tradition marketed for congregational studies feel like the research level of a previous generation. One now needs to track college and seminary publications – Pandora, Bethel College, CMU Press, Bluffton, and Kindred

[22] Since 1978, as an MCC representative in varying capacities, I have attended the annual Council of International Ministries (CIM) meetings of program directors of more than a dozen North American mission agencies (including MCC), plus many other related agencies that share with each other their visions, programs, and problems. Until just before MWC Calcutta 1997, this included reporting on theological education in many regions. Since then that feature has remained rather strong on Latin American reporting in its area committee. There had also been several meetings with MWC leaders to find a shared approach to global theological education through more systematic swapping of teachers and/or students. This failed to result in a set of commitments and programs, due to declining budgets or the readiness of agencies to support theological education at a more graduate level. As well, seminaries' budget projections were becoming more focused on their immediate constituency. Dalton Reimer now edits *Global Education Newsletter* on behalf of the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB), a most impressive resource showing what can be done by a community of goodwill.

Press – for the kind of serious engaging the tradition to be brought into one's teaching. What I also find troubling, when tracking debates on a usable history for Anabaptist theology, or for formulating an Anabaptist ethic in the face of the American penchant for imperial interventionism, or for people seeking to foster the Yoder legacy, is how limited are the sources to which these writers refer (an insider group, essentially). The community discourse functions within a small circle of specialists, not really across the disciplines as was envisioned by *The Conrad Grebel Review* when it started. What would it take to get to a stronger sense within Mennonite seminaries and colleges of a common community of discourse? Clearly more face-to-face time between faculty, but rare is the venue where the necessary interdisciplinary assembly of teachers meets for serious talk. The Mennonite scholarly journals are an obvious vehicle for conversation, but too often what is said there is not cited because it was not noticed. Given the smallness of the Mennonite scholarly world, this suggests we are not serious enough about seeking to converse within our circle in an inclusive way, even as we must try even harder to converse ecumenically and globally.

Changing Paradigms for History

The tri-partite paradigm of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern has been with us a long time in spite of its inherent value-laden nature. A more interesting periodization (even for students, I often discover) employs more specific categories that can trigger thoughtful discussion, even the excessively broad seven major paradigm shifts in Christian history and mission advanced by scholars such as David Bosch and Hans Kűng, or the sweeping interpretations popularized by Philip Jenkins. All of them convey at least a sense of major changes in organizing one's world view, of change processes of long duration, even as specific events or sudden "paradigm shifts" prompt contemporary anxieties about "change" as threat. The most obvious such local and limited paradigm shift is the constant talk about a "post 9/11 world."

The theological assumptions behind requiring a limited number of courses (at seminaries) for all, has to do with interpretations of Christian history that themselves need revision. Currently in Mennonite schools the loose but frequent invoking of "Anabaptist theology" presupposes a

common stance unchanging over 500 years, and in key matters remains rigid over against other Reformation traditions, including the Roman Catholic. The historical reality has been very diverse and contested constantly. What probably matters more is the reality of the ways in which recognizably common emphases of those Mennonite or Believers church communities that gradually developed church practices – a living heritage – were shaped extensively by their sharply contrasting contexts.

For example, patterns developed over 300 years in North America were formed by the absence of persecution, by the absence of war and destruction on American soil, and by a culture of denominational competition as a necessary and positive value; whereas the heritage that emerged from the 200-year Russian Mennonite experience was initially one of precisely articulated freedoms of religion, then persecution, massive martyrdoms, inner collapse and near total destruction of Mennonite institutional structure, and later a resurrection shared alongside other Christians as diverse as Pentecostal and Orthodox. There are at least four other major long-term community formations within sizable parts of the Mennonite heritage before we come to the many more contextually shaped forms of living globally as Mennonites in recent decades.

Not only is our major curricular emphasis at American Mennonite seminaries seeking to build too much on phenomena emerging within a specific context in several regions of early 16th-century western Europe, we also tend to speak of the different ecclesiologies arising in that era as needing to be critiqued. Yet we fail to convey how diverse were the ways those ecclesial bodies lived out their heritage as times changed and as they became more global through migration and mission. Once we get involved in ecumenical conversations (with other Reformation traditions), it becomes more obvious that we need remedial work in the history of the other traditions and indeed in that of our own. Must we continue treating the Reformation period as the primary moment of truth since the time of Christ?[23]

Very noticeable to me, upon returning from a sabbatical in 2009,

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[23] For many ways that question was articulated by various representatives of the Protestant traditions, see Walter Sawatsky, ed., *Prophetic and Renewal Movements: The Prague Consultations*. Vol. 47, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2009).

was the heightened talk among colleagues about cultural analysis, cultural hermeneutics, or other labels for paying attention to social change. Neither the core values statement nor the educational goals referred to above substantively addressed the importance of cultural change (or what makes for cultural change). Would courses labeled "cultural hermeneutics" or "congregation and cultural change" or "church and society" tell us much about cultural change? Since the call to be in, but not of, the culture can be traced back to Jesus, it still begs the question as to how counter-cultural living (an American Mennonite mantra) must be expressed in the coming years within our changing cultures. Revisiting past experience with new formulations of the "how" and "what for" questions remains a vital methodology.

Christian History in Global Perspective

My final observations concern a one-semester course, "Christian History in Global Perspective," that has been unusually stretching and stimulating to me and to some students. I was already seeking to address most of the issues in a course I first taught in the mid-1980s, "Eastern and Oriental Christianity," which many saw as only a quirky elective to learn about the esoteric "other" and did not immediately grasp the agenda of seeing things comparatively from within and outside a western Christian perspective. The one-semester Christian history course was initially intended for majors (doing an MA) as an integration exercise, but then I added about five initial lectures – a conventional survey of Christian history – to make it accessible to college graduates. Thereafter, each session was organized around a theme, and the chronological sweep in each session was 2000 years, whether mission, church and state, personal and public piety, or the human body. This produced a way of seeing major patterns of continuity and change.

On the mission theme, for example, we would note areas of Christian expansion during the initial three or four centuries, when in some places entire peoples (Armenia, Georgia) became Christian while in others mission followed overland trade routes. In the next phase, in addition to the geographical spread and impact of Islam, there were major new mission thrusts northeast and northwest of the Mediterranean world. In the one case, given that Islamic expansion was decimating Christianity in the southern and eastern sides of that world, eastern Christianity through

active mission essentially became Slavic, with a mission methodology of translating the message and fostering "autocephaly" (lit. "self-headed", with hierachs equal in status with other leaders). Ironically, it is what the Protestant missionary movement much later in the 19th century "invented" as the three-self strategy: "self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating." In the northwest direction, Roman Christianity became culturally Germanic over several centuries, given the collapse of the western Roman Empire by 450, yet everywhere there was a uniform liturgy in Latin, and clergy could not be ordained until they had learned doctrine in that language.

That is probably enough to indicate how helpful comparing patterns can be for assessing strengths and weaknesses of approaches to mission, without ignoring how the inner coherence of the faith had been transformed by the thought worlds of the Slavs and Germans. Adding that the primary agents of mission were monks (organized differently east and west) raises the question of how cross-cultural mission was to be pursued when the western Reformation did away with monasticism. Perhaps that helps account for the reality that Roman Catholic missions between 1550 and 1750 (largely by new monastic orders) were the golden age of Roman mission to the Americas, Africa, and Asia (very different in each continent for a long time) before Protestants figured out how to send individuals, families, some trained, some ordained, to achieve the global spread of Protestant Christianity, particularly its free church expressions between 1750 and 1950.

In such a course, since reform and renewal are always a feature somewhere, the western Reformation gets rated differently when necessarily compared with many other reform efforts. Thus, all those reformation traditions, even though many have taken on a permanency of difference and their own distinctives, cannot theologically claim legitimacy for a separate existence till the end of time. The historical perspective has kept driving me back to a greater grasp of the humility and penitence that necessarily accompanies all Christian history; the *imago dei* or even *missio dei* visible among the people of God has been glimpsed, mostly "through a glass darkly."

The critical reader will have noted that the operative mode in such history is a "socio-historical" one. I became accustomed to being viewed as less of a church historian by colleagues who, trained in divinity schools, still thought that the church history that mattered is historical theology or the

history of ideas. I have learned much about worship and liturgy before and during my years of teaching, since that is what Christians do everywhere, always, but it is a dynamic history of change. The respected Jesuit Robert Taft, a specialist in Byzantine liturgy, once introduced a lecture series by stating that his approach was "unapologetically socio-historical."[24] He, too, sensed the conventional bias in favor of studies of liturgical texts, but insisted that to interpret them (and the changes) within their embedded contexts mattered more.

Virtually from the beginning, themes such as *missio dei*, a multicultural peoplehood, conflict with the state, social and political ethics, and a host of challenges to cultural norms have been the subject matter of Christian history. How to think of the story, and what type of Christianity should emerge are only some of the issues that remain contested. What historians today seek to convey is the dynamic qualities of the story rather than a static adherence to philosophical principles or laws. Nevertheless, even if to be a historian of Christianity is virtually impossible, still it is in seeking to make sense of the whole story that one comes to appreciate how much the historian's craft depends on others. Taking Christian history seriously as a believing Christian also presupposes granting the ongoing influence of the Holy Spirit, with an awareness of qualities that the Spirit would manifest according to Jesus, so that criteria for assessment and critique require discerning the Spirit's role while identifying human factors (the influence of context, weather, money, wars, language – to name only the obvious ones).

Things went wrong pretty early after Pentecost, as with Ananias and Sapphira over property (Acts 5), and attempts at discipline and maintaining accountability within the church have been a constant issue. Tensions over leadership, and over compromises about what to impose on mission converts outside Jewish settings, occurred without always getting fully resolved. What seems to have happened for interpreters of history who declare the Church to have become apostate, or who pronounce anathemas on parts of it, is perhaps a failure in imagining how often the Holy Spirit's leading into truth involved a process of acknowledging sin, of falling short, and of turning again to the grace of God.

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[24] Robert F. Taft, S.J., *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2006), 4.

With that perspective, is it not necessary to approach Christian history – even to approach that perfectionist-tending Mennonite branch of it – with a theology of "nevertheless"? That is, a "nevertheless" that in spite of so many failures, even at the level of thinking (theology), knows it is through group penitence or "conversion of the churches" that we keep affirming the apostle Paul's insight that "when I am weak, then I am strong." For me, it has become a way of thinking that makes more room for being taught by "the least," those whose names do not head history book chapters but whose living and dying were part of the cross bearing, and an inclusion in the *missio dei*, where Christ draws them to himself (John 12).

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