The Undercommons of the Church:
Mennonite Political Theology against Dialogue

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Abstract

Contemporary North American Mennonite political theologians have tended to describe their projects in radical terms such as messianic, apocalyptic, differential, etc., in which creative resistance to social norms and power structures is privileged. However, their basic orientation towards the political or ecclesial community (the "commons") remains grounded in a liberal framework, which privileges social consensus. Mennonite political theology has benefited in some ways from this orientation toward the "commons," but has struggled to understand the radical authority that lies beyond the commons, which Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have described as the "undercommons." This article uses Harney and Moten's analysis of the undercommons to diagnose and re-describe Mennonite political theology.

> Thereupon, the people split into two parts and, as a consequence thereof, many discussions were held with each other but no good fruit seemed to grow out of it.
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> —*Unknown Mennonite editor, 1694*[1]

A classic short film by Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer called "Dimensions of Dialogue"[2] is divided into three segments, each portraying a type of human communication. In the first, "Eternal Conversation," we encounter several heads made out of food, metal, or paper products. Each head takes turns swallowing one of the others and reducing its component parts—

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[1] John D. Roth, *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 2002), 49.

2 The film is available on multiple sites, such as Jan Švankmajer, Dimensions of Dialogue, 1983, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-0a4Yxs4YY.

chopping up the food, crushing the metal, rotting the paper. In the end, all the heads are reduced to a primordial clay and simply regurgitate endless identical copies of each other. The second segment, "Passionate Discourse," shows two clay lovers who, in the act of making love and then physically fighting, begin to merge limbs and bodies until they become a single pile of clay. In the third segment, "Exhaustive Discussion," two clay heads offer each other various objects from their mouths. At first, these objects fit together: a toothbrush and toothpaste, bread and butter, a shoe and a shoelace, a pencil and a sharpener. But soon the objects are mismatched, with unfortunate results. Toothpaste is spread on bread, a shoe is sharpened, etc. In the end, both heads collapse in on themselves, panting and exhausted.

Besides its delightful use of stop-motion animation, Švankmajer's film operates as a corrective to the privilege that dialogue enjoys in liberal political theology. The film is a disturbing, disorienting portrayal of the liberal ideal of "the commons," in which ultimate value is found in the collective wisdom of public discourse, reconciliation, unity, or compromise. In civic terms, the commons is the space of public discourse, cosmopolitanism, or law. In ecclesial terms, it may be couched in terms of discernment or consensus. Much can be said for the power of the commons to promote basic rights and freedom, as well as a strong communal identity. Certainly, a political theology of the commons is a significant moral improvement over a theology of despotism or hierarchy. Yet, as Švankmajer's film vividly illustrates, the commons can also be a force of homogenization and violence.

My argument is that North American Mennonite political theology, both the theoretical and the practical, has been basically liberal in its orientation to the commons despite efforts to move it in a more radical direction. Mennonite theology has enjoyed the benefits of this orientation but also suffers from its underlying falsehood, that is, the identification of the commons with moral authority. The liberal orientation is unable to address the authority that lies beyond the commons, which the commons can only access indirectly.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have described this alternative space as the "undercommons."[3] Many Mennonite theologians have attempted to

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[3] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

bring the undercommons to the forefront, describing their projects in such terms as messianic, apocalyptic, or differential, but the legacy of liberalism is strong and deep. At most, we have achieved only an inconsistent vacillation between a liberal and radical political theology. This article attempts to use Harney and Moten's insightful description of the undercommons to make a diagnosis (why have we failed to adequately connect Mennonite political theology to the undercommons?) and a new attempt at description (how does the undercommons affect actually existing churches?).

Definitions and Frameworks

I use "political theology" in a fairly narrow sense. In its broadest use, political theology encompasses all theological discussions that emphasize political or social components.[4] This kind of political theology goes back to the earliest Christian communities and appears throughout Christian history. John Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* can be defined as a political theology in this wider sense, because it makes claims about Jesus as a model for political engagement.[5] I prefer to reserve the term for a more specific conversation concerned with how theological concepts become "secularized" or embodied in political power structures. This conversation could not have happened until the Enlightenment and the development of a secular space in opposition to the religious sphere, and did not begin in earnest until Carl Schmitt recognized in the 1920s that "all significant concepts of the modern

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[4] A broad definition is found in Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, "Preface," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), xi–xii: "an inquiry carried out by Christian theologians in relation to the political, where the political is defined broadly to include the various ways in which humans order common life." Compare this slightly more restricted definition, still broad enough to include a variety of historical streams: "Political theology is…the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social, and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world." William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, "Introduction to Second Edition," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 3.

[5] Perhaps the most well-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/ and in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015).

theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[6] Political theology in this narrower sense is an analysis of how theological ideas—including concepts such as sovereignty, salvation, and moral authority—function in social power structures. This analysis can take various forms from the political left or right, thinking of God as a real or fictional entity, and applying to the nation-state or other forms of political community. In any case, it focuses on how sacredness is translated and operates in social structures.

I will use three interrelated concepts from the discipline of political theology: sovereignty, the sacred, and moral authority. I follow Paul Kahn in making them essentially interchangeable. The sovereign, as Schmitt said, is what exists beyond the law and therefore grounds the law. Kahn notes that

> God's presence always precedes God's justice – just read the book of Job. The same was true of the political sovereign. Justice is a debate about the deployment of sovereign power, not about its creation. It was not the law that created the community of Israel but the act of a sovereign God who gave the law.[7]

In a monarchy, the sovereign may be a person, but in the modern nation-state it is dissolved in the political body itself (popular sovereignty). The important thing is that the sovereign is the ultimate source of authority. And because the sovereign occupies this divine position, it manifests the sacred to the community and possesses ultimate moral authority. The sovereign is that which grounds and defines moral claims. Any action or decision of the sovereign is by definition moral, and no action against the sovereign can be moral. In this sense, the "secular" has either no moral authority at all or only derivative moral authority.

Finally, it is useful to have in mind a few basic ways of interpreting sovereignty. Dorothee Sölle's framework is the one I will reference here. She separates theological frameworks into three basic camps: orthodox, liberal, and radical.[8] Each has a distinct way of positioning sovereignty relative to

[6] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 36.

[7] Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2008), 27.

[8] Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 21.

the political community. An orthodox political theology sees sovereignty as contained within a community but flowing downward from a single or narrow source. The monarch is the classic example, but sovereignty can also be invested in a text, as in biblical conservatism, in a small group of elders or aristocracy, or in a modern dictator, and so forth. I will mostly leave the orthodox model aside, but it has played and still plays a role in Mennonite consciousness and practice, particularly in the more conservative conferences and denominations, and seems to be on the rise in national politics in the United States and Europe.

The liberal idea of sovereignty comes from Enlightenment ideals of democracy and is the basis of the modern nation-state. Kahn describes how sovereignty operates in this context:

> Once the body of the citizen becomes the immediate locus of the sovereign, the distance between the finite and the sacred has been overcome. What is required now is not the violent sacrificial act from without but the realization of the truth of the self from within – an inward turning.[9]

In liberal political theology, moral authority originates from and depends on the consensus of the political body. The legitimacy of political leaders is dependent on their embodying the corporate will, and they can and should be removed if they cease to represent that consensus.[10]

A radical political theology does not invest sovereignty within the political body but defines it as what is outside the political body's norms, assumptions, or privileges. Liberation and feminist theologies are prime examples, but so are Emmanuel Levinas's theology of the Other and Gilles Deleuze's ethics of creative experimentation. Here, both a political community and its leaders operate at most with only indirect moral authority, whose ultimate source is located in a different sphere altogether. Sölle explains the

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[9] Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 37.

[10] "Once the locus of the sovereign presence shifts, the power of the king – though not necessarily his potential for violence – has already been broken. His deployment of torture is no longer a showing forth of the divine but an abuse of power.… Once the king no longer possesses the power to sacrifice, the revolution demands that he be sacrificed to the new sovereign. He has become an idol.… This has nothing to do with secularization or the rule of law but rather with the changing locus of the sacred." Ibid., 37.

distinction well between liberal and radical political theologies:

> God's preference for the poor . . . introduces an element of
> absoluteness. In *any* situation, God is with the poor and for the
> poor, with and for the tormented and oppressed in the most
> varied circumstances. . . . That is in no way relative, and one
> cannot say, "Yes, but we must also consider what becomes of
> the rich."[11]

Liberal theology is built on the assumption that moral authority comes from mutual agreement on basic principles across interests and social identities. Radical theology recognizes the remainder left after this commons is formed and makes the commons subordinate to it.

Is it possible to do away with sovereignty altogether? This is the dream of liberal politics—the post-sovereign society—which, in banishing the sacred from the public sphere, would also banish political violence. This fantasy has been thoroughly deconstructed by scholars such as Talal Asad and William Cavanaugh. Despite liberalism's efforts to reduce international relations to a purely legal framework, the logic of sovereignty prevails in a less overt form. Although no longer embodied in the national citizenry, sovereignty can now be equated with the commons of democratic cosmopolitanism, in which the "civilized" world is authorized to make necessary exceptions to international law in response to the backwardness of the "uncivilized" world.[12]

A similar dream sometimes makes its way into radical political theology as well. In response to the totalitarian sovereignty of Schmitt or even of liberal theorists, radical theologians may be tempted to confine sovereignty to the other two theological camps. For example, Catherine Keller uses "sovereignty" as shorthand for the logic of omnipotence and hierarchy that she wants to subvert. The implication is that a more radical eco-theology could escape sovereignty as such. But Keller actually has in mind a particular

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[11] Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 20.

[12] "Violence, I argue, is not only a continuous feature of [a liberal political community]. The absolute right to defend oneself by force becomes, in the context of industrial capitalism, the freedom to use violence globally: when social difference is seen as backwardness and backwardness as a source of danger to civilized society, self-defense calls for a project of reordering the world in which the rules of civilized warfare cannot be allowed to stand in the way." Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia Univ, Press, 2007), 62.

source of moral authority, just as absolute even if very different in form from the Schmittian sovereign, which she describes as "a mindfully indeterminate and interindebted collective" (the undercommons).[13] In one sense, it is a simple question of definition, yet accountability and clarity are gained by naming sovereignty as built into the radical tradition instead of pretending that it has been overcome.

What is the Undercommons?
Sovereignty is easier to describe in liberal and orthodox political theologies, because in both it is identical to an existing thing—either embodied in a specific leader, text, or institution or expressed in and through the political community. Sovereignty in the radical tradition is always difficult to define. While definitions by nature follow a logic of the commons (they seek publicly accepted and understandable terms), radical sovereignty cannot be captured by the commons. In fact, part of what is missing from Mennonite political theology is an adequate description of the undercommons *on its own terms*.

As a representative of black critical theory, Harney and Moten's work is significant because it attempts to express the radical absolute from the perspective of those occupying that space. In coining the term "undercommons," they play with the idea of the colonial settlement or enclosure—space carved out from the "surround." In the colonial mindset, the settlement is surrounded by dangerous forces of chaos and must be protected, both for self-defense and as the bastion of the civilizing influence that will eventually redeem the rest of the uncivilized space. Note the similarity to the liberal mindset above. This colonial space, the "commons," operates through a logic of rights, interests, and regulation. There are no rights outside it because it is the ground and origin of rights. Harney and Moten call this regulatory function "politics."[14] They see this same colonial logic operating in American society, and they focus on how the commons appears in the modern university: the pressure on students to take on debt

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[13] Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2018), 33.
[14] "What's left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common." Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 18.

and then plug into the marketplace in order to repay it; the growing use of contingent faculty and the dispossession of the curriculum from instructors; and the privileging of critical rather than creative thinking.

There is always resistance to the hegemony of the commons. "[W]here the aim is not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity, that place is the undercommons." It exists beyond or below the organizing social logic, which necessarily means living outside "politics" as defined above. Thus, if the undercommons is recognized at all, it will only be as irresponsibility:

> An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented.[15]

The undercommons represents a "wild beyond" out of the reach of dialogue, discussion, or consensus: "In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism."[16] In short, one must refuse the entire dialogical framework offered by the commons.

The undercommons is the name for the sacred outside the definable community—the radical absolute—and comes with the moral height associated with sovereignty or sacredness.

> I think what we're gesturing towards is real. . . . It's like a delirium (as Deleuze might say, by way of Hume) taking the form of, moving in the habit, putting on the habit, of a sovereign

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[15] Ibid., 20.
[16] Jack Halberstam, "Introduction" to Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 8.

articulation, something that an 'I' or a 'we' would say. But what it is, really . . . is a relay of breath that comes from somewhere else, that seems like it comes out of nowhere.[17]

It contains an authoritative request, demand or call, even if it is given in the form of "multiplicity and multivocality."[18] This poetic description makes the undercommons sound more complicated than it is, although it is difficult to put into words. "The undercommons, far from being a heroic figure of resistance, is the most ordinary thing."[19] The undercommons of a university, for instance, might consist of the "study" that happens in informal conversations outside the curriculum, especially those excluded a priori from classroom settings—perhaps conversations that don't fit disciplinary conventions, that make use of intuitive and subjective leaps, or that explore topics not on any syllabus.[20]

However, the undercommons does not simply name practices existing outside the institution. The term designates activity that cannot be recognized as legitimate (or recognized at all) because of power structures shaping the institutional discourse. In the political theology of the undercommons, sovereignty has a particular orientation and directional movement. It has an inverse relationship to dominant social structures, and therefore is directed in favor of subaltern populations and views. It exercises a "preferential option," to borrow a term from liberation theology. As a concrete example, Moten suggests the Mississippi Freedom Schools designed during the Civil Rights Movement to provide free curriculum to black elementary and high school students. The curriculum encouraged discussion, relevance, and engagement, and was based on a positive assessment of black culture.

My point is that the Mississippi Freedom School curriculum asked a couple of questions of the people who were involved in it, both the students and the teachers. One question was: What do we not have that we need. . . ? But the other question, which is, I think, prior to the first . . . is what do we have that we want

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[17] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 132–33.

[18] Ibid., 136.

[19] Kris Cohen, "For and Against Critique," open set, March 3, 2016, http://www.open-set.com/krcohen/reviews/for-and-against-critique/.

[20] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 68.

to keep? . . . [P]art of what we want to do is to organize ourselves around the principle that we don't want everything they have."[21]

Politically, the Black Panthers and the Occupy movement are examples of an undercommons.[22] Harney talks about the undercommons of government bureaucracy, in which employees find ways to be subtly creative:

> I remember once going . . . into the big post office that they later closed in downtown Manhattan. Everyone had their booth, and in lower Manhattan's post office behind almost every booth was a black or latina woman who had completely decorated the booth for herself. And it was full of, like, Mumia posters, pictures of kids, pictures of Michael Jackson, pictures of union stuff, everything. Every booth, so every time you went up, you got a different view. And I'm like, well, if these are the people who are supposed to be making an effect called the state, then, there's got to be an undercommons here too.[23]

More often, the undercommons might appear in very mundane things:

> We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity.[24]

The undercommons is not primarily defined by suffering, although it can and does suffer at the hands of the commons. In contrast to the commons, undercommons activity is done for its own sake, for enjoyment, as play.[25]

Three characteristics of the undercommons are especially important:

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[21] Ibid., 121.
[22] Ibid., 25, 105.
[23] Ibid., 143.
[24] Ibid., 110
[25] Ibid., 106.

(1) its basis in refusal, (2) its performative character, and (3) its collective but not abstract form. Drawing on literary critic Gayatri Spivak, Harney notes that the first "right" of the undercommons is the right to refuse rights.[26] For example, an NGO may intend to help a marginalized group. Its goal is to define and protect the interests of those lacking a voice, but often it has to impose, more or less subtly, some structures of the dominant framework in order to use the idea of rights at all.[27] The commons exerts pressure to translate ways of being together into forms that can be exploited. "I also feel that it's necessary for us to try to elaborate some other forms that don't take us through those political steps, that don't require becoming self-determining enough to have a voice and have interests," adds Harney, "and to acknowledge that people don't need to have interests to be with each other."[28] The undercommons, then, is first about refusing options laid out by the commons, including the need to be integrated into it.

One misunderstanding about the undercommons is that it is viciously relative. If sovereignty is defined as marginal to the dominant culture, are we not left immobilized by all the competing claims to marginalization, prey to endless Facebook debates, and overly earnest activists convinced that their interest group must have priority? Actually, this state of things applies only to the commons, where balancing interests, rights, and "voices" is of ultimate concern. An infinite regression of interests is a symptom of the liberal community.[29] Granted, the influence of the sovereignty of the undercommons might make this symptom more severe. If the discussion (this word should already be a clue) is conducted at the level of competing interests or voices, then it is an activity of the commons, not the undercommons.

This is not to say that NGO work or political activism in general should not be conducted, but to say that these activities exist in the liberal register, not the radical. By analogy, the transition from orthodox to liberal political theology does not mean that the role of political leadership is abolished or unnecessary, only that sacredness (orientation to the absolute) is transferred

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[26] Ibid., 124.
[27] See Gayatri Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 523–81.
[28] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 125.
[29] See Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro, "Social Networks as Dispositives of Neoliberal Governmentality," *Journal of Media Critique* 2, no. 7 (2016): 85–102.

from the leader to the people. We still need good political leaders in liberal political theory, and good communities, good activists, and good policy in radical political theory. However, the ultimate orientation of radical theory is not toward getting everyone an equal place in the conversation, but toward making room for existence outside the standard conversation. It's about what could and does happen when people refuse the conversation.

If the existential basis of the undercommons is refusal of "politics" as such, then its mode of operation is not political or administrative but performative. It can be difficult from the perspective of the commons to accept the legitimacy of a position without "interests." The Occupy movement was criticized, for example, for not having a platform or a set of demands. But such apparent irresponsibility is not due to a lack of vision or motive. "When we say we don't want management, it doesn't mean we don't want anything, that it just sits there and everything's fine." Harney explains, "There's something to be done, but it's performative, it's not managerial."[30] The undercommons is the space of elaboration, improvization, or rehearsal, not administration.

Moten recounts a ritual that he observed riding in a car with his grandfather in Arkansas in the 1960s. After giving someone a ride, the person would ask how much they owed for gas. "And he'd say, 'nothin.' . . . Sometimes he'd feign a kind of 'why would you even ask me [something] like that?'" But the debt had to be acknowledged, or else the rider would be considered rude. This everyday ritual is a way of refusing the economic structure of capitalism: "So . . . you begin to practice, improvise the relationship between necessity and freedom, not on the grounds of owing and credit, but on the grounds of unpayable debt."[31] This kind of performative action is necessarily collective. This example requires not only two people to engage in the ritual itself but also a broader subculture that values giving and receiving outside the formal economy. This collective culture is not a nameable "community," certainly not an institution. It is similar to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "the multitude," a collective noun but not an essence like "the people" in the liberal framework.[32]

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[30] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 157.
[31] Ibid.
[32] "We should note that the concept of the people is very different from that of the multitude.…

Church vis-à-vis Undercommons

In Mennonite political theology, the church is the primary community to be analyzed, and the question is, What is the church's relationship to the sacred? How is moral authority made available to the church? For many centuries, most Mennonites were content with an orthodox description of the sacred: the word of God is given through a straightforward reading of the Bible or interpreted by bishops, elders, or pastors. Perhaps this view is more popular than ever, if one includes all the variations of Mennonite and Amish denominations in North America and around the world. In North American Mennonite scholarship, however, many political theologies tend toward the radical, or describe themselves in that way.

John Howard Yoder's work has been the most influential in this respect. In *The Original Revolution*, for example, Yoder talks about the church as a social minority: "What changed between the third and fifth centuries was not the teaching of Jesus but the loss of the awareness of minority status, transformed into an attitude of 'establishment.'"[33] He sees loss of social power as an opportunity for the church to regain its status as a community embodying the sacred. The church is "a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them."[34] The Yoderian project is arguably an attempt to reclaim the church as an undercommons of the secular. Yoder's church might exemplify what Moten and Harney are talking about: a group that refuses the options given to it by common sense Constantinian ethics. The church is the community that abstains from any alliances with power structures.[35] It is like an "underground movement," an

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The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 102-103.

[33] John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 122.

[34] Ibid., 28.

[35] Ibid.,152.

"infiltration team,"[36] or a diasporic existence[37] or messianic ethic.[38]

What's interesting, however, is that the Yoderian community, while emphasizing its minority status, operates with liberal rules. In *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder outlines the basis for its authority: "The alternative to arbitrary individualism is not established authority but an authority in which the individual participates and to which he or she consents."[39] He suggests a sort of social contract (liberal) model of ecclesiology to replace an orthodox model of hierarchical authority. His community discovers truth and makes decisions based on dialogue and consensus. This process is characterized by "an open context, where both parties are free to speak, where additional witnesses provide objectivity and mediation, where reconciliation is the intention and the expected outcome is a judgment that God himself can stand behind. . . ."[40] This is a dynamic consensus, unpredictably influenced by the addition of minority voices, but insofar as the community engages in reconciliatory engagement with others, it can claim to embody God's authority.[41] The basis in consent and discourse is the reason that Yoder can claim a direct link between Western democracy and Christian congregationalism.[42]

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[36] Ibid., 28.

[37] John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[38] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

[39] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 24.

[40] Ibid., 28.

[41] "If we were to think of Christian unity not as a consensus already present, needing only to be explicated, nor as a compromise between deeply different settled positions needing to be hassled and haggled through to a barely tolerable halfway statement, but as being led forward beyond where we were before into the discovery of a position which will not say which of us were right in the past but will renew our unity because it deepens the definition of our mission, then it could be claimed that this ethical agenda bears special promise for rediscovery of a new sense of united mission which still lies ahead of us." Ibid., 121.

[42] "There is widely recognized evidence for a historic link between the Christian congregation (as the prototype) and the town meeting, between the Christian hermeneutic of dialogue in the Holy Spirit and free speech and parliament, or even between the Quaker vision of "that of God in every man" and nonviolent conflict resolution. It may work very creatively, but it can do so only if it goes all the way, to found its optimism on the logic of servanthood rather than mixing coercive beneficence with claimed theological modesty." Ibid., 166-67.

In *Body Politics* Yoder claims to be working in a direction similar to liberation theology: "Liberation theologians today speak of 'the epistemological privilege of the oppressed.' There is no blunter instrument to guarantee such a hearing for hitherto inadequately spoken-for causes than to remember Paul's simple rule that everyone must be given the floor."[43] It is true that some "liberation" theologies might focus on ensuring that marginalized groups have a place at the dominant conversation, that rights are extended equally to minority populations, or that everyone has an opportunity to participate in a system. However, these are really liberal theologies in disguise.

Radical theologies, on the other hand, recognize that "giving everyone the floor" only extends the dominant paradigm further.[44] The act of extending the logic of discourse, even open, "messianic" discourse, is a way to domesticate the undercommons into a manageable sphere. This is not the result of bad intentions but an inherent aspect of dialogue as a mode of communication necessarily based on a particular set of rules or "grammar." To participate in a dialogue means expressing something in a particular forum, language, and etiquette. In any actual dialogue, numerous cultural assumptions operate largely unconsciously but constrain the discourse nevertheless. It would be impossible to operate as a community or institution otherwise; some constraints are always necessary in order to rise to the level of abstraction required to form a "community."

Yoder's influence has shaped the basic strategy of the majority of subsequent Mennonite or Mennonite-inspired political theologies, namely the articulation of an anti-establishment but basically liberal community. Many, like Yoder, begin with an ideal consistent with the undercommons. For example, Travis Kroeker talks about "messianic ethics" as focusing "less upon the legitimating claims of defining institutions . . . than upon the embodied practices of communities that shape the public polis in the *saeculum*, the

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[43] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 69.

[44] It is the difference between liberal and radical feminism, for instance. The former might want women to have equal opportunities to become CEOs and make just as exorbitant salaries as male CEOs, whereas radical feminism might question the salary structure or capitalist system itself as inherently patriarchal, no matter who sits at the top.

everyday. . . ."[45] Or again, "ethics . . . is neither a matter of constructing frameworks or paradigms . . . , nor of problem-solving. It is in the first place a willingness to sit and walk together in the uncomfortable 'between' of a cultural divide. . . ."[46] Chris Huebner has introduced the idea of the "precariousness" of Mennonite identity, "marked by notable contradictions and ambiguities, conflicts and ruptures, that, when pushed, could be used to call into question the very idea of Mennonite identity itself."[47] Kyle Gingerich Hiebert has recently re-emphasized the apocalyptic elements of Yoder's theology, which "enjoins neither a flight from this world nor the creation of a speculative grid that regulates the meaning of being and which necessarily squelches the inevitable interruptions of surprising otherness that attempt to break into its closed system."[48] Nathan Kerr proposes an ecclesiology built on a "deviant set of values,"[49] in which the church breaks with "every identifiable social and institutional 'place.'"[50]

Of any Mennonite (or Mennonite-adjacent) political theologies, Dan Barber's political theology would be closest to Harney and Moten's, since both make significant use of Deleuze. In Barber's creative reading of Yoder, Christianity "finds itself constitutively dispersed, such that to be committed to it is to be committed to a diasporic existence. . . . It is not . . . a product of history-telling; it is instead a product of fabulation – and if it exists only as fabulation, which always stems from ungrounding, then its existence depends on its ability to become ungrounded, to 'bear with the chaos.'"[51] The diasporic impulse of Christianity disavows established identities and

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[45] P. Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 79.

[46] Ibid., 203.

[47] Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 35.

[48] Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 141.

[49] Nathan Kerr, "Communio Missionis: Certeau, Yoder, and the Missionary Space of the Church," in *The New Yoder*, eds. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 331.

[50] Ibid., 325.

[51] Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 134.

mutually exclusive binaries in favor of "interparticular differentiation."[52]

Each of these theologies, however, in some way identifies Christian communities with the messianic, the diasporic, the particular, minoritarian, or differential—in short, the undercommons. For Kroeker, the church is the "messianic community" that serves others and reconciles enemies on the model of Christ's radical humility.[53] Kerr's church is the "exilic community," which exists without an established identity because it is sent to liberate its "others."[54] Even Barber, who is most careful to separate his key term (diaspora) from any set identity, proposes Christianity as a "problematic discursive tradition that involves a commitment to diasporic existence." Thus a Christian community in the true sense problematizes both its own identity and dominant binary systems, such as secularity and religion.[55]

These recent political theologies, more than Yoder, may appear to have successfully articulated an ecclesiology in which the church exists as an undercommons with respect to the dominant culture, whether in the form of nationalism, secularism, militarism, high church, etc. It is true that the undercommons has some relativity built into it. The examples given by Harney and Moten always refer to some broader system, such as the university or capitalism. Even something like the Mississippi Freedom Schools has its own "common" identity and, perhaps, currents running underneath it that function as undercommons relative to its own logic. In that case, it would simply be a matter of perspective or scope whether the church is a commons or an undercommons.

However, there is a line, perhaps a bit blurry, between activities that participate at the level of abstraction required to qualify as a "community" and the informal "study" that Harney and Moten have in mind. There is a more or less objective distinction between spaces of commons and undercommons, and to identify a community as an undercommons is a category mistake. Identifying the community as the embodiment of the sacred puts a political theology into liberal territory, even if liberal terminology is intentionally

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52 Ibid., 145.

53 Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, 167-68.

54 Kerr, *"Communio Missionis,"* 331-32.

55 See also Daniel Colucciello Barber, "Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular," in *The New Yoder*, eds. Dula and Huebner, 271-93.

avoided. Identifying the church with sacred space, whatever the character of that sacredness, implies such goals as extending dialogue, promoting reconciliation or unity, or broadening relations. These might be very good goals, but from a radical perspective they merely describe the community's functioning and maintenance, not its manifestation of the sacred. Even if the basic ideas of fluidity, world-loyalty, or disestablishment have been built into Mennonite political theology for some time, we have as yet articulated only the undercommons' effect on a community, not the undercommons itself.

We have moved too quickly in Mennonite political theology from a correct idea of the sacredness of the undercommons to the idea that the undercommons can or should be embodied in the Christian community. The result is a set of fictional accounts that are interesting thought experiments but lack a basis in reality. No actually existing church satisfies the descriptions given in the Mennonite political theologies listed above. Precisely the churches that are most committed to social justice or outreach (and thus the likeliest to challenge dominant social paradigms), that do the most comprehensive self-criticism, that can assert their particularity—these are the churches that wield the most intense power to curate and maintain an internal identity, perhaps even an identity based on challenging identity. If a community exists in any meaningful sense, it necessarily wields dialogical power—the power to set a context for what can and cannot be communicated or considered within its purview.[56]

If sovereignty is truly located in the undercommons, an actual church must be a recipient rather than a producer of sacredness. From a church's perspective as a nameable, abstract community, radical sovereignty is always an external force. It acts upon a church but is not generated or defined by a church. If sovereignty is manifested in the space outside the community's self-articulation, the ecclesiology must be one of divine absence, not of divine presence.[57] The space of consensus is, in a way, God-forsaken space. God has abandoned it to us. In the act of dialogue, the community establishes and

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[56] See Malinda Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 51.

[57] For a fuller treatment of the implications of divine absence for Mennonite theology, see Justin Heinzekehr, *The Absent Christ: An Anabaptist Theology of the Empty Tomb* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2019).

maintains social norms, setting boundaries between the assumed and the sacred unknown. The process of forming a consensus is arguably a process of secularization whereby previously sacred ground is made mundane.[58]

Implications for Practice

In one sense, the shift to a radical political theology would not be a major leap, since many existing Mennonite political theologies already link the sacred to some concepts of the undercommons. But it does change how to think about dialogue, discernment, and consensus in the church. Any such activity is at most a secondary reaction to the primary sacred sphere that always remains unincorporated into dialogue. This does not imply that dialogue is negative or worthless. Just because it is not a sacred activity does not mean that communities should stop engaging in dialogue, even if were possible to do so. Indeed, the sovereign demand impinging on us from outside our self-articulation is often experienced or interpreted by the commons as a demand to be articulated in public language. However, a political theology of the undercommons should change our orientation to dialogue. The impetus and authority that drive dialogue are not synonymous with the community, nor is the outcome of any particular dialogue a sovereign decision (or "exception" in Schmitt's sense). The function of dialogue is not to discover truth but to make existing truth mundane to the community. A community can be more or less effective as a secularizer of divine authority, and only to that extent can a community participate indirectly in the sovereignty of the undercommons.

The main practical implication is that the quality of a church's decision-making processes does not guarantee the moral authority of the outcome. As Carol Wise and Stephanie Krehbiel point out, the very practice of discussing certain questions, namely around LGBTQ inclusion, can be an act of violence in some circumstances. As Wise says, "I've come to the

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[58] This relationship is exactly opposite to the way Barber articulates the church's "secularizing" function. He uses lower-case "secular" to mean an affirmation of the particularity and contingency of the world, and upper-case "Secular" to mean the pretension to universality. This causes confusion, because "secularism" actually plays the function of the sacred in his political theology. When Barber says the church is "secular," he means that the church manifests this sacred function, defined as "God's otherness, which is produced by diaspora and apocalyptic." Barber, "Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular," 291.

conclusion that process is how Mennonites justify and inflict violence. As long as we have a process, we have been fair, good, and kind people."[59] Krehbiel's dissertation outlines the history of this dynamic over the past several decades, identifying a pattern of using discernment as a way of controlling and moderating LGBTQ concerns in the service of denominational unity, at great psychological expense to many queer participants.[60] All this discernment has not led to unity but has eroded trust in the institutional church. In the liberal paradigm, political leaders have moral authority only insofar as they embody the will of the community; but in reality, as radical theology would predict, the community only has moral authority insofar as it can adapt and respond to its undercommons.

In Mennonite institutions and congregations, a stubborn idea persists that the role of the faith community is to create better, fuller, more vulnerable, or more self-critical processes of dialogue. I connect this to the lingering liberalism of Mennonite political theology. The Yoderian model already suggests that a community's engagement should take the form of disruptive (messianic, apocalyptic) discourse rather than majoritarian discourse, but this still ultimately implies a liberal stance, which does not align with the way that moral authority actually works.

In reality, the church is always faced with a sacred authority that takes precedence over dialogical processes and may impinge on these processes, drive them in certain directions, or derail them altogether. Despite Yoder's emphasis on the commitment of Anabaptists to dialogue, a quick glance at the history of Mennonite denominations from the 16th through 21st centuries shows how far *disunity* and *refusal* of dialogue has actually shaped the church. Ultimately, these failures occur because some issue or difference of interpretation transcends the parameters of a dialogue. In these cases, it eventually becomes clear that to continue engaging in dialogue would be to compromise the moral authority of the community. At that point, leaders may choose to intentionally divide the community, or division happens in

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[59] Quoted in Stephanie Krehbiel, *Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA*, Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2015, 24. https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/24844/Krehbiel_ku_0099D_14104_ DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1.Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA}
[60] Ibid.

spite of their efforts, or the community loses its ability to channel moral authority.

A recognition of the sovereignty of the undercommons would help church leaders (as well as other political leaders) take a more modest view of what can be accomplished through dialogue. Rather than thinking of the church itself as the vehicle for truth or moral authority, which places an unrealistic amount of pressure on discernment processes, it would be better to see these as maintenance activities ultimately derivative of something beyond themselves. The undercommons sometimes demands dialogue; at other times it demands cessation of dialogue. The community's success or decline depends on its response to those sovereign demands.

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