Introduction

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Mennonite. Systematic. Theology. Each of these terms is contested in manifold ways. Linked together, however, the possibility of disagreement is raised exponentially. The purpose of this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (CGR) is to provide a forum for significant voices in an important discussion; the specific occasion for it is the response generated by David Cramer's "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," which appeared in CGR's Fall 2013 issue. In sketching the characteristics that should guide future Mennonite systematic theologies, Cramer outlined what appears to be an idiosyncratic appropriation of the Wesleyan quadrilateral: a theology rooted in scripture and the broader Christian tradition that also utilizes reasoned non-foundationalist arguments, as well as personal and communal experience.[1]

Four exemplary approaches to Mennonite systematic theology appear in the pages that follow. Quite surprisingly, each of the four central characteristics named by Cramer finds a sympathetic affirmation here: (1) J. Denny Weaver's "From Narrative Comes Theology" emphatically endorses "the New Testament narrative of Jesus" as the beginning of Mennonite systematic theology; (2) Darrin Snyder Belousek's "God, Evil, and (Non) Violence: Creation Theology, Creative Theology, and Christian Ethics" not so vaguely suggests that "traditional creation theology" (by this the author means ecumenical and historically orthodox theology) may best provide "a stable ground for a nonviolent stance"; (3) Nathanael Inglis's "The Importance of Gordon Kaufman's Constructive Theological Method for Contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology" singles out Kaufman's philosophical commitments to historicism and pragmatism as the two key methodological commitments necessary for the future of Anabaptist-Mennonite systematic theology; and (4) Justin Heinzekehr's "Getting to Silence: The Role of System in Mennonite Theology" leans heavily on experiences as events not only requiring abstraction for representation and communication but also

[1] See David Cramer, "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 263.

The Conrad Grebel Review 34, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 113-116.

illuminating the fragility of the requisite theological systems that emerge through this abstraction.

Of course, to characterize the respective contributions in this manner is to oversimplify both the arguments themselves and the dialogical nature of this issue. Beginning with Weaver's argument, therefore, I want to try to shed some light on a few of the debates, themes, and questions that lie behind and within these essays, and that are invariably playing a part in shaping Mennonite systematic theology today.

Weaver's essay contends that "systematic theology for Mennonites begins with the narrative of Jesus," a methodological move loosely related to, but not dependent upon, Cramer's recognition of the historical particularity of all forms of reasoning.[2] Weaver then draws out seventeen implications from this initial assumption, some of which have figured prominently in his other writings, such as "theology is a derived statement" (implication 1), "Jesus rejected violence" (implication 3), and classic or standard Christological statements are relativized or decentered (implication 4).

There is some truth to Weaver's claim about the centrality of the narrative of Jesus for Mennonite theology (and his theology self-consciously follows John Howard Yoder in important ways in this respect), but the sweeping simplicity of his assertion that all theology is therefore a derived statement belies the vigorous, nuanced debate among Mennonite theologians about the relationship between biblical texts and theology that has been going on for decades. To illustrate: already in 1991, Gordon Kaufman argued that "Scripture itself must be 'construed' . . . as some particular sort of literature that we use for certain purposes; and such a construal always involves an imaginative act of the theologian."[3] What this means is that, even in using the term "New Testament" and prioritizing the story of Jesus Christ, Weaver has made theological decisions that cannot claim to be merely derivative of the narrative itself. Of course, his initial theological decisions about the text itself may be justified, but he cannot claim they do not exist.

Following Kaufman's lead, Inglis's paper boldly steps in to provide something like the appropriate justification for the selection of the New

[2] Ibid., 272.

[3] Gordon D. Kaufman, "Critical Theology and the Bible: A Response to A. James Reimer," in *So Wide a Sea: Essays on Biblical and Systematic Theology*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991), 60.

Testament narrative of Jesus—what Inglis refers to as "christomorphism" in various forms—that is absent in Weaver's argument. What Inglis is seeking to articulate is a way of doing theology in what he calls a "detraditionalized society," the conditions Mennonites find themselves in once they are no longer defined by the rural communities that once organically provided regulative and orientational determinations of their identity. To that end, he suggests that Kaufman's historicism and pragmatism enriches, and appropriately strengthens, the noncreedalism and christomorphic praxis already present in the broad Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

That said, what Inglis does not seem to notice—but what Kaufman does notice in acknowledging debts to the Enlightenment and modern democratic experience—is that the society that Mennonites find themselves in is not really detraditionalized so much as it is defined by different traditions than those of early 20th-century rural Mennonite communities. Yet Inglis is optimistic that Kaufman provides solid resources for Christian communities as they reconstruct traditions as a basis for maintaining identity in the face of societal changes.

Darrin Snyder Belousek, however, is much less optimistic that Kaufman's theology leads Mennonites to the christomorphic humanization expected by Inglis. Reflecting on a theology of creation, and affirming the specter of A. James Reimer (who has been directly and indirectly been in the crosshairs of the previous two essays), Belousek energetically attempts to demonstrate that Kaufman's historicism is, in important respects, the antithesis of traditional creation theology. Kaufman might agree with this assessment. The controversial aspect of Belousek's argument surfaces when it follows the logic of Kaufman's position to the point of suggesting that Kaufman's God is the origin of violence and the "violence-trajectories of human development are not moral deviations . . . but emerge serendipitously from ongoing cosmic creativity." Because this is the case, Belousek concludes, only a return to the separation of God and history as articulated in "traditional creation theology" can suffice to ground and motivate nonviolence.

The careful reader will see, however, that Belousek's appeal to traditional doctrinal theology is also in service of a pragmatic end, namely "a sustainable commitment to nonviolent discipleship." Whether this way of reasoning accurately reflects traditional doctrinal theology is probably still

up for grabs; what is clear is that even if Belousek is entirely correct here, the ghost of Kaufman has not been entirely banished from Mennonite theology.

Looping back and casting Weaver's argument in a new light, Justin Heinzekehr's essay finds theological precursors not in the likes of Yoder, Kaufman, and Reimer but among those who have frequently found themselves at the margins of Mennonite thought—Elaine Enns, Gayle Gerber Koontz, and Carol Penner, for example—and whose voices also seem to say that systematic theology does not have much to offer, if this CGR issue is any indication. While Heinzekehr initially appears to affirm narrative as the foundational mode for Mennonite theology when he claims that it "allows us to synthesize the particularity and universality of Jesus' life," what he ends up revealing is that narrative "may actually disguise a greater level of violence than more 'systematic' genres" because the elements that enable it to translate the meaning of particular events (for instance, plot, protagonists, antagonists, and theories about the purpose and meaning of existence) are the same ones that function as universals in a manner that is both hidden and unexamined within the worldview of the narrative itself. Therefore, Heinzekehr argues that Mennonites ought to construct systems rather than naively depend upon narratives, but the systems must respond adequately to various types of experience, not claim "finality," and can expect to be shattered at some point in the future.

Whether one agrees with Heinzekehr or not, I think he is right to cast systematic theology as a "deliberative genre" in which specific arguments and refutations are made with the intention of persuading one's opponent. The dissent and diversity in this genre genuinely seek to hear the other, because that is a prerequisite for arguing with the other. It is my hope that this CGR issue illuminates the fragility inherent in the ways of systematizing Mennonite theology we have inherited. I also hope it invigorates us to ask new questions, especially of our own narratives and theological shibboleths. Mennonite systematic theology is dead, long live Mennonite systematic theology.

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