

Reflections on the End of *The Conrad Grebel Review*

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I first became aware of the *Conrad Grebel Review* from the periodical display in the reading room of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) library. I began my undergraduate studies there in 1993. My plan was to study theology for a few years, and then pursue a law degree. But I was quickly drawn in by my theology courses and wondered if I should keep studying theology and see where that might lead. In that small basement reading room, the periodical display was a colorful beacon of distraction and curiosity. I would pick up physical copies of a latest journal issue and explore what was going in the fields of theology, history, biblical studies, philosophy, and literature. It was a new world.

While I cannot recall which articles I may have perused, I did perceive that in its pages, *CGR* was a forum for vigorous debate, especially about the nature of Mennonite theology and identity. In my classes I had been alerted to the fact that Mennonite theologians had strong disagreements, for example, about the significance of the creeds, the spiritual poverty or other shortcomings of the Anabaptist Vision, and whether there ought to be a distinctive Mennonite atonement theology. I was aware of passionate debates among thinkers like J. Denny Weaver and A. James Reimer, and of emerging feminist critiques, debates that were relevant to not only my developing interest in academic theology but also the very nature of the Christian life. While I did not cite any articles from *CGR* in term papers (I checked the few I still have in an old file), it was part of a wider ecosystem I was eager to explore, and eventually to participate in.

In 1999, I made the decision to move to Toronto to pursue graduate studies in theology. At the ecumenical Toronto School of Theology, I was nearly always the only Mennonite in my courses. This pushed me to understand my own tradition in a deeper way, though the experience of being asked for “the Mennonite” view on the topic of the day could often work against a nagging desire to affirm a deep and diverse range of authentically Mennonite approaches to a topic. I began to notice my own habit of deferring to just a few

voices, that of John Howard Yoder most notably, in order to get my bearings in these conversations.

In the context of developing my theological voice in an ecumenical context, the *CGR* became relevant in a new way. It was also relevant as I took my first steps in scholarly publication. First, book review editor Arthur Boers invited me to review the over 700-page *Hauerwas Reader*.¹ Then, after helping to organize the very first Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre graduate student conference in 2002, I worked with fellow student Phil Enns to approach *CGR* about publishing some papers from that conference. We worked out a process for peer review, and one of the results was that I not only served as a bit of a guest editor, but I had my first scholarly publication: “The *Sensus Fidei* and Mennonite Theology.”² In retrospect, I see that I was staking a claim for a Mennonite theology that was not only fully engaged with the wider Christian tradition, but actually needed that wider tradition in order to fulfill its own purpose.

I was hired by Conrad Grebel University College as a full-time faculty member in 2008, and a year later was asked to become the *CGR* editor, a position I held until 2017. These were years of some significant change for the journal, but the one constant was the steady hand of managing editor Stephen Jones, a truly excellent colleague in the world of publishing. Most of my work as editor consisted of the weekly routine of reading submissions, identifying reviewers, making decisions about manuscripts, and providing authors with detailed feedback. However, a number of the initiatives I pursued during my term as editor reveal some of the challenges in journal publishing and some of the challenges for *CGR* in particular.

In my view, a key indicator of the health, reputation, and viability of a journal is whether scholars are clamoring to publish in its pages. And while *CGR* did receive unsolicited manuscripts, there were not enough of them. The practice of having theme issues, especially if contributors are invited, can create the perception that a journal does not accept unsolicited submissions. I learned that some scholars did indeed have this perception. Others viewed it as a somewhat “in-house” publication, perhaps because various public lectures delivered at Grebel were routinely included.

1 *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 107-108.

2 *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 50-58.

My first initiative was to develop a culture of engaged consulting editors. I had inherited a list of consulting editors, all of whom were men and nearly all of whom were retired. Some had been consulting editors since the journal was founded. I thanked them for their service and instituted a practice of inviting consulting editors who were active scholars and would serve a definite term of six years. I asked them to be advocates for the journal and to promote it to colleagues and graduate students as a venue for publication. In addition to occasional review of manuscripts, these editors would also be invited to provide advice on the direction of the journal.

When I began, *CGR* was effectively subsidized by Grebel's operations. Hard copy subscriptions were declining at a steady rate every year. I would sometimes receive the suggestion from others at Grebel that if we "went on-line" the problem would be solved, but the reality was that that would have made little financial difference. Our modest subscription rates essentially covered the cost of printing and mailing. The net cost was for staff time, especially for the managing editor, thus the cost for producing content was fairly fixed regardless of the mode of delivery to the reader.

However, we did pursue strategies to increase readership and engagement. We negotiated an agreement with ATLA (American Theological Library Association) for the inclusion of all *CGR* issues in their full-text database (with a one-year embargo), an agreement that generated some annual royalties. We also licensed our content with a humanities database, a decision made from the principle that *CGR* was not only a religion journal, though this meant our agreement with ATLA was not exclusive and therefore less financially lucrative. We also began publishing directly on our own website and invested considerable energy in digitizing several years of back issues.

I encountered wildly different perceptions about readership, and the all-important scholarly impact of articles in *CGR*. Some colleagues had the perception that basically no one reads the articles. Some looked at declining hard copy sales as an indicator of declining readership. Yet, annual PDF downloads from ATLA by 2017 were over 10,000 per year. Our own website was receiving about 15,000 unique page views per year.

At the very least, journal reading had changed significantly from an earlier era of strong hard-copy subscriptions, including some pastors and churches. In that era, one assumed that there was a defined and committed

readership, scanning every table of contents and reading some articles, just as I had done in the CMBC reading room. In such a context, an issue was a coherent artefact, with an engaging image on the cover. Increasingly, individual articles were read by those who would find them through an online search, perhaps unaware of the history or context of the journal in which they appeared.

One strategy for financial sustainability was to pursue funding from the Aid to Scholarly Journals program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The decision to publish open access was driven in part by their eligibility requirements, as was a restructuring of our editorial board and oversight process. However, despite significant work over many years to meet their various criteria, soon after we did so, the program was suspended.

A persistent tension for the *CGR* has been between its founding vision as a multidisciplinary journal and the reality that it has been typically perceived as a theological journal. In his analysis of the first decade of *CGR*, Paul Tiessen characterized it as interested in “the religion and social practice, the art and the thought” of Mennonites.³ He acknowledged the challenge of multidisciplinary but also the benefit in terms of serving a minority community. For much of the life of the journal, until her retirement from Grebel in 2012, the broader vision of cultural reflection was epitomized by the “Literary Refractions” section curated and edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen, featuring the work of poets, playwrights, and literary critics. *CGR* also included works in musicology, sociology, and political science, including those by Grebel faculty delivered in the annual Eby Lecture.

As the editor, I experienced the tension between a multidisciplinary aspiration and a theological reality as primarily a pragmatic one. How will we find first-rate articles? Do we constantly solicit in order to publish works in a range of disciplines (and recognize that someone in Music may hesitate to publish original work in *CGR* because their colleagues in the discipline will not read it there), or do we follow the lead of those who submit their work unsolicited, which was primarily in theology and ethics? I inclined toward

3 Paul Tiessen, “Two Scholarly Journals and one Ethnic/Religious Minority in Canada,” *ACS [Association for Canadian Studies] Newsletter*, Spring 1993, 20. The other Canadian journal Tiessen discusses is the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

the latter in the belief that going where the energy was would be most sustainable. It was reasonable to assume that scholars submitted manuscripts because they believed *CGR* was a place that the readers they wanted to reach would find it, and cite it, thus strengthening a virtuous cycle.

But this shift in direction, and in my experience it was a subtle shift and not a hard turn, only highlighted the questions about *CGR*'s purpose and constituency. Is *CGR* *about* Mennonites, *by* Mennonites, or *for* Mennonites? The issue of disciplinary scope or focus maps on to these questions in complex ways. Yet, as *CGR* articles were increasingly accessed because of specific search terms, and less so because readers had any ongoing connection with the journal, this would surely change not only reception but also who would seek to write for the *CGR*. Does following the lead of those who submit articles unsolicited, primarily in theology, change the readership, especially as such articles engage with wider theological discourses? To take myself for example, even though I am both a Mennonite and a theologian, I do not write only for Mennonites (and thus seek to publish in a range of scholarly venues), and even when I do write about more explicitly-Mennonite topics, I hope to reach a broader audience because I hope that what I write is persuasive and useful as *Christian* theology.

In his analysis, Paul Tiessen characterized the early *CGR* as exhibiting "moral urgency and social commitment," and fostering vigorous debate "not necessarily dominated by theologians," in some contrast with a detached approach that might examine historical or sociological developments without any sense of what they mean for actual communities.⁴ In my experience, this sense of purpose has indeed characterized *CGR* throughout its lifespan, as I'll reflect on further below in relation to peace theology and to teaching, though perhaps more dominated by theologians as time went on. To take just one example, early in my tenure I received a letter from the Board of Faith and Life of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches requesting that we not publish an article that would be publicly critical of their official position on "homosexuality and same-sex marriage." We did

4 Tiessen, "Two Scholarly Journals," 22.

publish it,⁵ not only because it passed our peer-review process and we were not restricted by confessional statements, but because of *CGR*'s established culture of publishing provocative work on pressing social questions.

I offer a few further reflections on the content published during my tenure as editor. Given that in several institutions (including at Grebel) Peace and Conflict Studies and Theological Studies are quite separate academic departments, such siloing can be challenged through publication. I note issues devoted to the Responsibility to Protect (28, no. 3 [Fall 2010]), Mennonite Central Committee (29, no. 1 [Winter 2011]), John Howard Yoder's *Nonviolence: A Brief History* (29, no. 3 [Fall 2011]), Revisiting Mennonite Peace Theology (34, no. 1 [Winter 2016]) and Global Mennonite Peacebuilding (35, no. 3 [Fall 2017]). I note a significant number of articles devoted to peace and the character of God and also to ecotheology. I think that Malinda Elizabeth Berry's "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship"⁶ is one of many instances where *CGR* facilitated important constructive contributions to scholarship.

I regret that we were primarily followers, and not leaders, in the public reckoning with John Howard Yoder's legacy of sexually abusive behavior that began in 2015. The late 2000s and early 2010s were "peak Yoder" with several conferences, the appearance of several posthumous works by him, and many articles and books engaging with his theology including special issues of *CGR*. We were fully invested in this. Though I was aware of what, at the time, I might have described as his sexual misconduct (and have since learned more about the scale and extent⁷), my primary personal concern at the time was with his hegemonic status within the Mennonite theological academy. His work was becoming nearly synonymous with Mennonite the-

5 David Eagle, "Pneumatological Ecclesiology and Same-sex Marriage: A Non-essentialist Approach using the Work of Eugene Rogers and John Zizioulas," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 28, no.1 (Winter 2010): 43-68.

6 *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 49-73. This essay has been included as a new type in the republication of John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panaroma of Types*, 2nd ed. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2024).

7 See especially Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast,' Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80.

ology, a dynamic that I now recognize kept theologians invested in his theology and provided some resistance to the long-overdue reckoning. Beginning around 2016, we instituted the practice of requiring authors to acknowledge and engage with the fact of his behavior, at the very least with a footnote acknowledging the harms caused by his sexual abuse.

As I reflect on themes around which I tried to spark conversation, I am especially pleased with the series of special issues we did on pedagogy: Teaching the Bible (28, no. 2 [Spring 2010]), Teaching History (30, no. 3 [Fall 2012]), Teaching Peace Studies (32, no. 2 [Spring 2014]), and Teaching Ethics (35, no. 1 [Winter 2017]). This was an effort to intentionally engage with a range of disciplines but also to offer readers something different. With a mix of those teaching at Mennonite institutions and non-Mennonite ones (public and private), the result was sustained reflection on the complex and often reciprocal relationship between the practice of teaching and the development of knowledge in particular areas. While I have no need for there to be a distinctive “Mennonite” approach to teaching as a practice or to any particular discipline, these articles do highlight some common and some particular challenges that face postsecondary teachers.

What is the future for the kinds of conversations that *CGR* has hosted in the past, and will its legacy and ethos live on in other forms? While specific publishing initiatives are being explored, I know that the landscape continues to change in many ways. I recently wrote a reflection on the closing of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre,⁸ and it seems like the end of *CGR* is yet another sign that many of the institutions important and familiar to me have run their course. Whatever *CGR*’s legacy is, whether multidisciplinary engagement with Mennonite culture, or theological engagement with the wider Christian tradition from a Mennonite perspective, or something else, the nature of that legacy will need to contend with increasing academic employment precarity, disciplinary fragmentation, social media, and changes in Mennonite institutional culture. It will need to reckon with various histories of harm and newer voices calling for radical change. While I am not sure I have the publishing solution (and suspect there is no single solution), I do

8 Jeremy M. Bergen, “Reflections on the End of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre,” *Canadian Mennonite*, 19 December 2023, <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/reflections-end-toronto-mennonite-theological-centre>.

believe that insightful, rigorous, passionate, engaged, and eloquent people will find ways to extend some of the conversations which, for a while, were reflected in the pages of *CGR*.

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