



# ***The Conrad Grebel Review***

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## Editorial

Several months ago, our neighbors erected a solid, 3 metre-high fence around the main part of their property. Surrounding residents were puzzled by this, as these people are not reclusive, siege-mentality types. Yet we've jokingly come to refer to this blight in the neighborhood as the "Y2K house," recognizing the possibility that they may be stockpiling goods in preparation for post-millennium chaos. Our humorous cynicism may reflect what Ivan Emke refers to in this issue as, "millennial fatigue syndrome."

Emke, widely known for his humorous takes on Mennonitism in a past column written for a Canadian Mennonite newspaper, contributes *The Conrad Grebel Review's* salute to the millennium in his reflection, "Is that the time already?" Emke suggests that perhaps Mennonites will put more energy into marking the "Anabaptist Half-Millennium" in the year 2025 and, given the penchant for anniversaries amongst historians of that tradition, I think he is probably right.

Conrad Grebel College, the University of Waterloo church college that publishes this journal, celebrated its 35<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1999. In recognition of this, we solicited an article from Hans-Jürgen Goertz, whose 1998 biographical sketch of Conrad Grebel marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Swiss reformer. Goertz's book represented one of the few acknowledgements of this event (along with special-edition t-shirts issued at this college). This is perhaps not surprising given an interpretive process which increasingly diminishes Grebel's centrality to Swiss Anabaptism, despite his main claim to fame which remains his act of performing the first radical re-baptism in 1525.

By contrast, a great deal of fanfare accompanied the comparable anniversary of the 1496 birth of Menno Simons, the Dutch Anabaptist leader. In his article on "Making Menno," historian Royden Loewen reflects on the process of image-making that has surrounded the positioning (falsely so) of Simons as 'founder' of the Mennonites. Loewen suggests an irony, given the limited detail that exists about the former priest's life, in the fact that Menno Simons holds the place of an ethno-religious 'icon' that has come to embody the group itself.

For something completely different, Linda Boynton Arthur offers a fascinating piece of her long-term ethnographic research on Holdeman Mennonites. In this article, which brings together theories on material culture, gender, and the sociology of the body, Arthur examines two aspects of cloth in Holdeman culture: clothing prescriptions imposed on women and quilting practise among women. In both cases, Holdeman women exercise resistance and find self-expression within a community modelled around patriarchal values and social control.

In addition to articles mentioned above, we are pleased to publish the address given by noted Canadian theologian, Gregory Baum, at convocation ceremonies of the Master of Theological Studies program at Conrad Grebel College. Cincinnati-based writer Dallas Wiebe contributes prose on “Love in Old Age,” about which literary editor Hildi Froese Tiessen says more. Two responses to articles published in the Spring 1999 issue are included, as well as an assortment of book reviews.

Happy reading and happy millennium!

Marlene Epp, *editor*

**On the cover:** Sculpture titled, “Hermes Head or Skyblue the Badass” by Ohio artist John Leon (Leontakianakis). The latter title, according to Leon, “is in honor of my friend, the author Dallas Wiebe, wearer of bowlers, baseball caps, and bobbies’ hats.”

# Conrad Grebel – A Provisional Life

*Hans-Jürgen Goertz*

## I

In 1996 the memory of Menno Simons was celebrated, who first saw the light of day five hundred years ago. He was not a founding father but a pastor to the persecuted Anabaptists who, in the Netherlands, along the Rhine, and in Northern Germany, were experiencing a crisis. He conferred a new identity on them. Under his leadership they became “the Quiet in the Land.” The resolute and gentle character and the comfort that Simons offered, and the firmness he showed when necessary, could certainly arouse the feelings that father figures evince. For this reason he is still lovingly honored. Such feelings did not immediately arise when the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Conrad Grebel’s birth was commemorated in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

His year of birth is not known precisely, but Grebel was doubtless a young man when he became a co-founder of the Anabaptists in Switzerland. In fact, he was the first person who dared break with the time-honored, legally-protected practice of infant baptism, and performed baptism upon the profession of faith on a former priest in a private house in Zurich “because at that time there was no appointed servant to perform such work,” as stated later in a biblically stylized account of the origins of the Anabaptist movement.<sup>2</sup> Grebel was steeped in personal difficulties; he was impetuous and lacked self-restraint, and was perhaps even violent-tempered. He had a humanistic education, but he was anything but composed and moderate. He was relentless, when it came to carrying through perceived truth. He was prepared to suffer for the sake of the Gospel, but he could also, when the signs indicated stormy weather, pour oil on the fire of the peasants’ revolts and forget any thought of self-sacrifice as soon as the opportunity arose to build an Anabaptist people’s church and avoid the path to a Free Church. He was

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*Hans-Jürgen Goertz is a professor at the Institute for social and Economic History at the University of Hamburg. Translation by Michael Zimmerman, University of Waterloo.*

restless, intemperate, torn this way and that way, and he kept at a distance everyone who came close to him. He does not arouse feelings of timeless devotion and is not an easy person to celebrate.

Nothing had turned out well for Grebel. He had broken off studies in Basel, Vienna, and Paris, and had fallen out with his parents; he could find no way to a secure professional existence. He was dissatisfied with the course of the Reformation in Zurich, though at first he had supported it. Then he turned against Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer of the city. He left his young family and went underground. After performing the baptism of the runaway priest Georg Blaurock of Graubünden, he strove in vain to re-establish the pure form of the church. While fleeing the henchmen of the authorities he hid away in the vineyards of Maienfeld and died of the plague. It was the brief life of a non-conforming, self-willed, radical. It is inconceivable how such a life could produce something worth remembering.

In the 1930s Harold S. Bender wrote the first academic biography about Grebel. It was the subject of his doctorate in Heidelberg in 1936, but it was not published until 1950.<sup>3</sup> The visionary beginnings of the Reformation's Free Church tradition interested Bender. In 1943 he described "The Anabaptist Vision," a clearly outlined model following Christ that led to the separation of church and state and to a church that would refuse to have anything to do with religious justifications of the state's military actions, indeed, would not tolerate the killing of anyone by human hands. In the meantime, it has been shown how difficult it is to verify Bender's vision historically. The origins of Anabaptism are cloudy, unclear, and contradictory. What interests me is not the vision that can be held out as the standard for the "true" church, but rather the question of how it came about that Grebel took a path leading to radical religiosity. Was it the boldness of thought, the religious virtuosity of a humanistically-educated layperson, or everyday experiences that steered him onto a new path?

## II

Conrad Grebel was not the "Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists." Bender exaggerated slightly with this as the title of his biography. As far as organization is concerned, others were more successful.

Grebel was not the “coryphaeus of the Anabaptists” - a suggestively intended metaphor taken from the ancient world of sport used by Zwingli to characterize the humanistically educated, forceful champion of the Anabaptists. He neither set the tone for good or evil nor conceived the slogans with which the Anabaptists defied ecclesiastic and secular authority or on which they built their theological structure. Often the ideas were supplied by others. He took them up, transposed them, and pursued them with rigor and single-mindedness, not sparing himself when it was necessary to commit himself to the Anabaptist rejuvenation of Christianity. He was not an original theological mind, even though he used his education in the service of Anabaptism. The Anabaptist theologian of substance was Balthasar Hubmaier, one-time professor of theology at the University of Ingolstadt. In Zwingli’s eyes, Grebel belonged, after he had fallen into disfavor, to the theologically ignorant like Wilhelm Reublin whom Zwingli judged as “stupid and brazen, verbose and of corresponding less understanding.”<sup>4</sup>

Grebel was not a comforter of souls like Menno Simons, who accompanied the brothers and sisters with encouragement and comfort on their path into martyrdom. Perhaps Grebel would have been able to offer support in the extreme trial of life when called upon, drawing from the well of his ideas on the following of the suffering Christ. However, he died before the wave of severe persecutions came upon the Anabaptists. He was surely a critical agitator. Zwingli experienced how his educated disciple from a good family suddenly turned against him in 1523, showing solidarity with preachers in the countryside and redirecting toward Zwingli and the city council the effective agitation of emotions against the traditional clergy. That obviously affected the reformer very deeply. Again and again he referred to it: “When they first appeared, many of our own were taken in by them and were driven to hate us through their lies, cries for help, and hypocrisy.”<sup>5</sup> Zwingli was not about to tolerate that. He interpreted hate against his own person as betrayal against the Gospel which, he believed, was on the right course in Zurich.

Grebel’s strength lay in his ability to bring others into discussion, not to slacken off but to be relentless, even toward himself and his family when fighting for the truth as he perceived it. His proclivity for polemical criticism fit well into the existing anticlerical milieu of controversy. With merciless perspicacity he criticized the mistakes and deficiencies of priests, monks, and



nuns, showing disdain for everything that they represented, including the appearance of piety they spread around themselves and their cult. Zwingli was as much disturbed by the hypocrisy among the clergy as he was by the feigning humility of the radicals.<sup>6</sup> In essence, Grebel connected with Zwingli's criticism of the clergy and intensified it, one-sidedly, forcefully, and without compromise. In contrast to the image of the deceitful clergy he upheld the image of the pious lay person. He did not limit his criticism to insults and denunciation but also outlined fundamental principles for a renewal of Christianity, as represented and embodied practically by devout lay people. The personalization of the criticism resulted in the personalization of the key ideas of the reform movement.

Grebel had consciously absorbed the anticlerical environment of conflict, and thus his thinking received a very definite orientation. (1) He related the anticlerical contrast to his own existence. He experienced the crucial turning point in his own life as the conversion and rebirth described in the New Testament and as a transition from the old to the new creation. The single morality of the humanists changed to a rigid form of Christian sanctity. (2) He willingly opened himself to the concept of the priesthood of all believers and took aim at the misdeeds of the church. (3) *Sola scriptura* could be combined with the priestly self-image of the lay person. The reading and discussion of Holy Scripture within the circle of brethren became the germ cell for a new understanding of the church. (4) The postulant of purity gains validity in his letters to Thomas Müntzer as a reaction to the impure lives of the clerics. The layperson perceived the reforming *sola gratia* not just as an act of existential purification but as an admonition to submit oneself, through the "rule of Christ," to a permanent, communally controlled process of purification. (5) It can thus be explained why the radicals placed such emphasis on the practice of faith. Not only what the layperson believed, but also, and above all, what he did, determined the possibility of a fundamental renewal of Christianity. (6) Accompanying this was the particular attention Grebel devoted to the problem of church ordinances. They were not "adiaphorous," irrelevant to the faith, as Zwingli maintained, but rather ordinances in which the life of Christians was actualized. Otherwise they would not have been biblically advised. The reformers wanted to wait before renewing the ordinances in order not to burden the conscience of traditional

believers and not to anger them unnecessarily towards the newly discovered Gospel. The radicals saw it differently. They could not countenance overburdening those who had just come to the faith and were dependent on supportive regulations in order to maintain their allegiance to Christ. They lost faith in the phrase “protection of the weak” and felt abandoned; but, in view of the sole saving grace of God, they considered themselves to be the weak who were unable to achieve anything on their own. (7) The anticlerical self-image corresponded to the radicals’ views of secular authority. An authority that is not prepared to utilize its power uncompromisingly in the service of church which has already been led to godly truth has forfeited its claim to be “God’s servant” (Rom. 13:4). There is nothing that such an authority “will not stoop to,” and one can not expect such an authority to contribute to the renewal of Christianity. It has no say in the church and may not be cooperated with. In this experience is rooted the subsequent demand of the Anabaptists: to strictly separate the Christian and civil communities, to distinguish between the order within and outside of the “completeness of Christ” as stated in the Schleitheim Confession of 1527<sup>7</sup>; in modern terms, to distinguish between church and state.

At first glance this anticlerically-conceived framework gives an impression of soundness. One thing fits the next. On closer observation, contradictions are apparent. At one point Grebel refers to Zwingli as having opened his eyes and those of his brethren to the Gospel; at another he maintains that the truth of the Gospel was first revealed to them when they went from being listeners to reformatory preaching to becoming readers of Holy Scripture. Grebel would dispute any claim that he experienced conversion through his encounter with Zwingli. At times he followed Scripture to the letter, at other times he followed the spirit of Scripture or outlined far-reaching connections in order to determine the meaning of a biblical word. Here he sank into an exegetical method of which he reproached Zwingli in the Second Disputation on baptism. On the one hand, he observed the small, defenseless community prepared to suffer as the model of the future church, as in his letter to Müntzer in September 1524. On the other hand, he allowed all thought of a church that evolved from the free choice of believers and was visibly distinguishable from the civil community to recede into the background when a chance to advance an Anabaptist people’s church again

presented itself. His criticism of Müntzer's revolutionary militancy was not as fundamental as might be assumed, if we consider how Grebel became involved in the revolutionary situation in the Grüninger district and how he supported the Zurich citizens' struggle for freedom. Sources indicate a fundamental agreement between Grebel and the rebels. Nowhere is there criticism of revolutionary militancy and self-assertion.

The early Anabaptists, foremost among them Grebel, did not have a uniform conception of reformation at their disposal. Nor did some simply represent the idea of a people's church and others the idea of a free church. On the contrary, especially the peace-loving, ready to suffer, signatories of the letter to Müntzer,<sup>8</sup> Conrad Grebel and Johannes Brötli, are the best examples to show that the same Anabaptists stood for the concept of a free church in one situation and for the concept of a people's church in another. Everything was still provisional.

Accordingly, one could accuse Grebel of inconsistency, as did his brother-in-law Joachim Vadian of St. Gallen later on. We could also gain the impression that he developed a kind of improvised theology. The reasons for it are difficult to explain. Perhaps it was the only appropriate form in which a lay person could make theological sense of the events in which he was involved. Perhaps it was a desperate attempt not to be pushed to the fringe in the dispute over the Reformation. Perhaps Grebel surmised that the Christian's existence would remain provisional in light of the "perfection of Christ." Should this supposition be true, then he stood nearer to Zwingli than he wanted to admit, because in Zwingli's *On Divine and Human Justice (Von göttlicher und menschlicher Gerechtigkeit, 1523)*, the deficient, provisional character of human existence and order is derived from divine spiritual working that alone is perfect. Humankind's search to achieve a degree of divine justice and love remains desirable but unattainable. However, Grebel drew a different conclusion than Zwingli. The reformer justified the secular authority's say in the church. It cannot act godly, but rather humanly – like any member of the community – and is compelled by duty to align the morals of political action with the will of God. Grebel instead entrusted himself to the social movement, whose realizable goal is never set once and for all but must first be sought in a concrete attack on the existing power structure. Like the social movement, the corresponding theology was provisional. Zwingli

thought in terms of a city *order*, as became evident at the end of the *Second Disputation* (October 1523), while Grebel and his friends followed the *movement* of communal self-liberation.

We can thus see that the same approach, namely an ontological differentiation between the divine working of the Spirit and human action, two divergent, indeed mutually antagonistic, positions could arise. From this viewpoint Zwingli certainly interpreted the facts incorrectly when he pronounced this terse judgment on apostates: “They are gone out from us; but were not with us, otherwise they would have remained with us.”<sup>9</sup> Essentially, this was not an objective judgment but a biblically cloaked denunciation. The author of the first letter of John from which these words are taken (I John 2:19) had apostates in mind who were causing unrest and confusion in his community: “Children, it is the final hour! And as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, so have many become Antichrists; therefore we recognize that the final hour has come” (verse 18). During the final days the radicals were stigmatized as “Antichrists,” as diabolical monsters. Here Zwingli adopted an anticlerical argument and turned it against his former followers. The radicals, likewise, did not spare Zwingli; they decried him in a similar way: “publically . . . with great anger, without restraint, [they say] that I am a heretic, a murderer, a thief, the true Antichrist, falsifier of the scriptures and had done worse than the pope.”<sup>10</sup> Zwingli and the Anabaptists had sunk their claws into one another and resorted to the most extreme measures of malediction, denunciation, and condemnation in order to stand up to each other – with one exception: Zwingli was on his way to power, whereas the Anabaptists daily became more powerless.

When looked at rationally these adversaries appear to have stood on the common “ground of the reformatory gospel,” as Walther Köhler once thought.<sup>11</sup> However, the gospel took on a different form in the civil situation of the city than in the revolutionary movement of the countryside. In the villages the Scriptures were interpreted differently than in the city; rulers drew different conclusions from the word of God than did the ruled; the powerful heard sermons differently than the powerless. When the reforming camp suddenly showed fractures and gradually broke apart, the reason was not theological – at least not primarily. Rather, the break took place because the political-social realm of experience to which the Gospel was applied was

already torn apart. The experience not of an ideal world but of a broken one was given theological consideration and led to the break-up of the community of reformers.

Again, it would be erroneous to suggest that Zwingli and the Anabaptists lacked fundamental commonalities or otherwise would have remained united and not come to blows. But it would also be incorrect to believe that the break was not theological in nature, but solely a problem of church order and practice, of obedient faith vis-à-vis the commandments of Holy Scripture and the judgment of the divine Spirit.

The break between Zwingli and the Anabaptists began before the first confessional baptism, with the experiences that both had had with secular authorities. Zwingli had experienced how the council in the city got *behind* him, and his former followers had experienced how the council in the country went *against* them. However, this would explain only the opposition between Zwingli and Simon Stumpf, who rose against each other at the Second Disputation of Zurich, and not that between Zwingli and Grebel, because both lived within the social realm of the city. But Grebel, through his conversations with the preachers in the countryside and in the circle of the book dealer Andreas Castelberger, was aware that the true nature of the secular authority, with which he had collided in the past, showed itself in the countryside. It was this authority with which Zwingli had joined forces. This observation led Grebel to join forces with Simon Stumpf in the future and not with Zwingli.

Harold S. Bender claimed that Zwingli proceeded step by step to find a way for the reformation in Zurich; the same was also true of his followers. As demanded by the prevailing experience, they grew step by step in their radicalism and finally into Anabaptism. This also explains why Grebel tried, on the one hand, to develop consistent views, and why, on the other, he became entangled in contradictions. It was not his theological view that vacillated, but his experiences that he reworked theologically. The more sensitively he reacted to them, the more provisional became what he thought and did.

Grebel did not put his stamp on Anabaptism but rather thought and believed as his brethren did; he acted and suffered as they did. Perhaps he was shrewder, more critical, in any case more unrelenting when it was necessary to push through the recognized “truth” of Holy Scripture. His temperament possibly played a role, as did the experience of feeling inferior and abandoned

in conflicts with his father and with his family, teachers, and the aristocracy. He felt like a “Nemo” ( a nothing and no one, “no longer Grebel”), as he very early adopted Ulrich von Hutten’s famous self-accusation in order to comprehend himself in his desolate situation.<sup>12</sup> A psychic pattern of experience had begun to develop that suited the unassimilated, non-conformist tendency of his Christian faith, with the conviction that God is everything and man nothing. It was a faith which embraced the authority that does not disappoint, with a willingness for martyrdom and acceptance into a community which casts aside everything that stands in the way of the workings of the divine Spirit. In a similar way Heinold Fast has spoken of a “foundational psychological structure” to which, above all, Grebel’s death urge could be attributed.<sup>13</sup> The isolated son of a patrician, who was not able to find the way to a secure profession but who longed for security, he found this security in the fellowship of outcast brothers and sisters.

Grebel stood at the forefront of a movement that was on the way to a new church community. He did not, like Menno Simons, come upon it, but rather contributed to its emergence. It was not yet developed to the point that he could find peace and fulfillment in it. In his short life we can recognize how unclear and confused the beginnings of Anabaptism in Switzerland were, how contradictory, flustered, aggressive, and fragile. The movement’s emergence was euphoric, marked by a deep earnestness of faith but also by opinionatedness, human weakness, denunciation, violence, and quiet suffering.

No one knows what Grebel looked like – this non-conformist son of a patrician, the critic of pious pretense, the first Anabaptist – and no one knows his final resting place. All traces have been washed away. Some of the impetus of his work did live on in Swiss Anabaptism, which soon traveled the hitherto unclear path to the Free Church. It was still risky to base its existence on Anabaptist non-conformism. Gone was the provisional, the groping and seeking, that is difficult to understand in view of Grebel’s subversive activities and that was replaced with set-phrases and hardened rules. But the provisional form of existence respects the signs of the times, and does not recoil from the looming end of the world.

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### III

Grebel fell by the wayside, Zwingli was successful. Who was right: the powerful or the powerless? Each thought and acted according to the truth as he perceived it in the Holy Scripture. Did the one understand it because of his theological education, but the other misunderstand it because he was a layperson who had only an incomplete theological education? Such a question does not touch on the crux of the controversy, because both Zwingli and Grebel were deeply convinced that Holy Scripture was open to the learned and unlearned, the theologian and the layperson alike. Indeed, compared to the priests of traditional belief, the lay person was virtually predestined to understand the Scripture and to judge the teachings of the theologians. Zwingli and Grebel also agreed that the Holy Spirit working within people opens up the meaning of Scripture. Although each accused the other of a godless employment of the word of God, the question of their correct or false interpretation of Scripture remains undecided.

The reason for Zwingli and Grebel's divergent interpretations lies elsewhere, namely in the experiences that shaped each of them. Zwingli, it has been said, had good experiences with the patricians, whereas Grebel had bad experiences. The latter joined forces with the preachers in the countryside and began to see the circumstances of the beginning of reform through their eyes. Harmony with secular authority led to the positive view of the relationship between God's word and the secular sword, whereas the dissent with authority led to a negative assessment of this relationship. The respective experiences awakened the particular interest with which Holy Scripture was read. They gave the readings form and determined how they were read. They were not the source of religious content and did not determine what impacted on the people's faith. There was much room for the creativity of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the divided world, with the will of the rulers above and the resistance of the people below, left behind traces in the relations between Zwingli and Grebel. Both men found this hard to bear.

A sense of tragedy pervades Grebel's life, as has sometimes been noted. Zwingli also came to a tragic end. The "man with the sword," as Hans Rudolf Hilty called him,<sup>14</sup> died by the sword during the Kappel War in 1531. His body was quartered and burned. Both Zwingli and Grebel were carried off – as

heretics and somehow also as martyrs. History, to which we at times entrust the rendering of equitable judgment can apparently not decide whether to declare one or the other correct. Out of this entangled contradictoriness a thought emerges which Ernst Troeltsch develops in *The Social Teachings of Christian Churches and Groups*. He states that church and sects did not coexist in irreconcilable, mutual exclusivity but rather complemented one another. Neither the church (the established territorial protestant churches) nor the sects (the communities of Anabaptists) succeeded in presenting the entire truth of Holy Scripture. Each exercised its right to cull its own biblical truth from the deficits of the other.<sup>15</sup> While Grebel was alive, Anabaptism had not developed into a sect. The later separatist tendencies were indicated, but nothing more. Troeltsch did not perceive this. Nevertheless, the idea of complementarity, in which one side completes the other is helpful.

Zwingli spoke for some and Grebel for others. In a divided world, it was obviously not possible for only one voice to proclaim Holy Scripture. Had the newly discovered Gospel reached everyone, then Zwingli and Grebel would have been well advised not to fight but to complement one another. Yet it was necessary that one give way. Some voices nonetheless, suggested that people should treat each other more respectfully than had hitherto been the case. Wolfgang Capito wrote to Zwingli: "I am really, truly happy that in our church a gentleness prevails such that no one is judged peremptorily: we offer ourselves to the weak, yes, we surround the needy with support and direct the power of love especially to where imperfection is in greatest need of it. With this gift we will be victorious, my brother."<sup>16</sup> The Strasbourg reformer found these words in 1527, after Grebel had already died. No one had longed more for this love than the first Anabaptist. For the people of that time Christian burial was a deep expression of brotherly love: one was ushered by brothers from this life into the next. But nowhere is it reported that Grebel was given a Christian burial. Not only was his life provisional, but the mourning of his death was also improvised.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on an passage from my book *Konrad Grebel. Kritiker des frommen Scheins: 1498-1526. Eine biographische Skizze* (Konrad Grebel. *Critic of Pious Pretense: 1498-1526. A Biographical Sketch*). (Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, Bolanden/Pfalz und Kämpers Verlag, Hamburg, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Heinold Fast, ed., *Der linke Flügel der Reformation. Glaubenszeugnisse der Täufer, Spiritualisten, Schwärmer und Antitrinitaner* (*The Left Wing of the Reformation. Confessions of Faith of the Anabaptists, Spiritualists, Zealots, and Anti-Trinitarians*) (Bremen, 1962), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel, ca. 1498-1526: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, IN, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Zwingli to Konrad Sam, September 1527, quoted from Mira Baumgartner, *Die Täufer und Zwingli. Eine Dokumentation* (Zürich, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>6</sup> Huldreich Zwingli's Collected Works, ed. Emil Egli, Georg Finsler, Walther Köhler, et al., (Zürich, 1905). Volume III, 421; Volume IV, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Fast, 66.

<sup>8</sup> John C. Wenger, ed., *Conrad Grebel's Programmatic Letters of 1524* (Scottsdale, PA, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Zwingli, *Works*, IV, 208.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>11</sup> Walther Köhler, "The Zürcher Täufer" in *Gedenkschrift zum 400jährigen Jubiläum der Mennoniten oder Täufergesinnten* (Commemorative Writing for the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Mennonites or the Anabaptists) (Ludwigshafen, 1925), 63.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad Grebel to Joachim Vadian, 14 October 1524 (from Zurich), quoted from Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Anabaptism. The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* (Scottsdale, PA, Kitchener, ON: 1985), 296, 686.

<sup>13</sup> Heinold Fast, "Conrad Grebel: The Covenant on the Cross," in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed., *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus*. (Kitchener, ON; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 130.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Rudolf Hilty, *Risse. Erzählerische Recherchen (Rifts. Narrative Studies)*, (Bern, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (London, 1931); *Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen, 1912). Compare Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "Religiöse Bewegungen in der Frühen Neuzeit," *Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte* (München, 1993), Volume 20, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Capito to Ulrich Zwingli, 7 November 1527, in Baumgartner, *Die Täufer und Zwingli*, 221.

## **Making Menno: The Historical Images of a Religious Leader**

*Royden Loewen*

All Canadian groups have their “great man” or “great woman.” He or she has been chosen as an icon to represent the very embodiment of the group. For Canadian Ukrainians it might be Dr. Joseph Oleskiw; for the Norwegians, “Jackrabbit” Johannsen; for the Doukhobors, Peter V. Verigin – all men linked closely with Canadian immigrants and their successful integration into the new land. Sometimes groups become sensitive about how their “man” is represented; consider, for example, the statuary reincarnation of Louis Riel during the mid-1990s on the banks of the Red River in Winnipeg, from twisted and tormented prophet to smartly dressed Lower Canadian barrister. Sometimes they create their particularly “Canadian” man as the Italians re-Italianized explorer John Cabot, who was actually their own Giovanni Caboto. And German Canadians have discovered that it was not the Norseman Leif Erickson alone who ‘discovered’ Canada, but Erickson along with Tyrkir, a German crew member. Sometimes there is a “great woman” who intersects this male iconography. Ukrainians have their mythological Princess Olha, the Cossack Mother, and the Doukhobors their Anatasia Holuboff, who challenged her son Peter Verigin, Jr. for the right to lead this mystical, pacifist Canadian sect.<sup>1</sup>

During the last century Mennonites, too, have created a popular representation of peoplehood. This was especially true during 1996, the 500th birthday of Menno Simons, the Frisian priest turned Anabaptist fugitive. It may seem odd to make this assertion: non-Mennonites usually seem surprised to learn that Menno Simons was not the founder of the Mennonites, and Mennonites themselves might be surprised to learn that Menno was relatively obscure until a century ago. Perhaps at no time has Menno the man been spoken of as much as in 1996.

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*Royden Loewen holds the Chair in Mennonite Studies and is associate professor of history at the University of Winnipeg.*

During that anniversary year Mennonites created a blizzard of activities. The Americans commissioned a musical, hosted several conferences, and published a dozen church magazine articles. The Soviet *Aussiedler* Mennonites in Germany organized a four-day conference on Menno's theology. The Manitobans sponsored a lecture series in April and arranged to have world-renowned tenor Ben Heppner sing in Winnipeg in November. The Dutch outdid all others: they hosted a four-day conference attended by 800 people at Mennorode, they launched Piet Visser and Mary Sprunger's lavishly illustrated pictorial biography, they commissioned a new official portrait, and they requested their government to create a special Menno stamp. They even issued Menno memorabilia, including a "Menno 500" biodegradable pen and pencil set, a commemorative tin of sweet *stroopwafel*, a battery-less flashlight, and a 12-day bicycle pilgrimage guide taking one from Menno's birthplace in Witmarsum in Friesland to his place of death in Oldesloe, Germany.<sup>2</sup>

How did this Menno come to be made? His work as Anabaptist leader did not point unequivocally to a time when he would become the namesake of a worldwide ethno-religious group numbering over 1,000,000 members. True, he had a remarkable conversion. Mennonite students have now become familiar with the events leading up to Menno's 1536 epiphany when, at age 40, he exchanged his life as a respected Catholic priest in Witmarsum for that of an Anabaptist fugitive preacher, and how for the next twenty-five years he travelled tirelessly, wrote profusely, and preached and baptized from Friesland to East Friesland to Westphalia to Schleswig-Holstein to Poland and back usually while being pursued by authorities answering Charles V's challenge to bring him in for a 100 guilder reward.

But in many other respects Menno was an unremarkable leader. He joined the Anabaptist movement ten years after it began in Switzerland in 1525. He was unlike the early Swiss radicals who separated themselves from the corruption of the state church through the politically charged act of adult believer's baptism, making church for them a voluntary and exclusive body. Those early Swiss leaders – Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, Michael Sattler, Margret Hottinger – were young, socially radical, and often university educated. Inevitably they met an early death, hounded to their demise by the

plague; even more likely were they severely tortured and burnt at the stake, or mercifully drowned if they were female. When the movement spread north to South Germany it took on mystical qualities: its leaders – Hans Denck, Hans Hut, Melchior Rinck – spoke of a spiritual bond with Christ manifested diversely in a pacifist love or a chiliastic apocalyptic age of violence. When Anabaptism spread eastward to Moravia, it took on radically communalist properties: Jacob Hutter and Peter Riedemann spoke of an ontological transformation from a life of violence and greed to one of selflessness, simplicity, and common property. When Anabaptism moved westward to Basel and Strasbourg, it exhibited itself in a veneration of prophetic voices that proved most liberating for women leaders; Ursula Jost and Barbara Rebstock were only the most prominent of the prophetesses.

Menno Simons had no apocalyptic visions. He lacked a university education, having learned Latin and only a little Greek at the monastery near his birthplace of Witmarsum. His attitude to women was pastoral but paternalistic, and his wife Gertrude is mentioned only once in his voluminous writings. His agenda was hardly socially revolutionary; true, he harshly castigated the rich and the greedy, especially those religious leaders who by declaring themselves sole divine negotiators “raked together money, gold, silver . . . cities, principalities and kingdoms,” but he readily took shelter when offered it by lenient princes and princesses, and he longed for a stable community.<sup>3</sup> And arguably he devoted much of his writing to make the point that Anabaptism was not radical, but a manifestation of sober-minded, dedicated servants of a peaceful Christ.

He did not even present the image of a radical innovator. The South German Anabaptist Hans Hut has been described as “a very learned, clever fellow, a fair length of a man, a rustic person, with cropped brown hair, a pale yellow moustache”<sup>4</sup>; the Swiss leader Georg Blaurock bears the historic image of a “man of striking appearance, his black hair and beard and his fiery eyes betray[ing] an impulsive character.”<sup>5</sup> The physical description of Menno Simons presented by Professor Egil Grisliis in a graduate Reformation history class at the University of Manitoba during the mid-1980s was that of “a stout, fat, heavy man, broken or rough of face [wearing] a brown beard [and unable to] walk well.” Unlike hundreds of early leaders Menno did not face a martyr’s death; he was never even arrested or tortured. He died at age 65, a very old man

for the 1500s, and was buried with dignity in a garden on the estate of a sympathetic nobleman. When he engaged the authorities in debate it was in a voice of thunderous disdain and disapproval: “the Roman antichrist has gained such respect . . . that even the imperial majesty . . . has to humble himself to kiss his feet”; the village clergy engage in “shameful seduction of women . . . they have eyes full of adultery, are at home with harlots, beget illegitimate children”; theologians enjoy “perverted fleshly ease” and cherish vain honor when addressed as “doctor, lord and master.” The general populace of Christendom is not composed of followers of Christ: “verily you see nothing anywhere but unnatural carousing and drinking, pride as that of Lucifer” from people who then seek salvation in “hypocritical fastings [and] pilgrimages” and revere “dumb idols of stone.”<sup>6</sup> Contrast this to the engaging witty debates of Michael Sattler during his trial in 1527 or of Lijsbeth Dirks in 1535<sup>7</sup>; there we find unequivocally a man who saw things in black and white terms, one who smothered his opposition with bombastic, thunderous, and continual denunciation.<sup>8</sup>

What makes Menno an unlikely namesake of the Anabaptists, too, is that less is known about him than about almost any other early leader. By contrast, we know much about that first man to rebaptize an adult in 1525, the 26-year-old Conrad Grebel: we know that he attended universities in Basel, Vienna, and Paris, and that his father was Jacob Grebel, his mother Dorothea Fries. We know that Jacob was a wealthy iron merchant and member of the Zurich town council. We know that Conrad was at odds with his parents, who disapproved of his licentious and violent life as a university student and of his marriage to a woman of lower social status. We know in detail the process by which he fell out of favor with Ulrich Zwingli, even the very date of his baptism as an adult – 21 January 1525 – in Felix Manz’s house. We have no such details for Menno. Historians have speculated that his parents were dairy farmers, that he studied with the Premonstratensian brothers, and that he was baptized early in 1536 by Obbe Philips, the surgeon barber of Leuwarden.<sup>9</sup> But this is all conjecture. Most details of Menno’s life remain a mystery.

Yet it was Menno who gave his name to the Anabaptist movement. The reason for this has generated some debate. Menno was neither the only Anabaptist leader nor the only prolific writer, and his particular ideas of a pacifist and biblicist sectarian religion were not especially unique or profound.

He was one among many others. Indeed, the first reference to “Mennonite” or “Mennist” occurred in 1541, when in East Friesland the authorities exempted his brand of Anabaptism from the Davidites (who at that time were more numerous) and the Batenburgers (who were better known, even if it was for their violent, thieving, iconoclastic Anabaptism).<sup>10</sup> Ironically, the name would not take root in Menno’s own territory; Dutch Anabaptists refused to take the name of their own “reformer” and are known to this day as the *Doopsgezinden*, the “baptist oriented.”<sup>11</sup> The name itself spread to groups of Anabaptists who did not know Menno personally and was used by groups who disapproved of some of his central teachings. The Swiss Anabaptists, for example, never met Menno, abhorred his docetic christology, and opposed his strict views of the ban and shunning. Yet by 1600 they had taken the name “Mennonite” to distinguish themselves more fully from the name “Anabaptist,” which by that time had come to be associated with the violence of Thomas Müntzer in 1525 and, much worse, the chiliastic horror of the Westphalian city of Münster in 1535. Menno came to stand for something at a particular juncture of Anabaptist history.

Indeed, it was the debacle at Münster that drew Menno to the Anabaptists. There thousands of half-starved, unemployed North German and Dutch Anabaptists used political and military might to take over the city and purify it for the anticipated return of the Lord in April 1535. What ensued was an eighteen-month reign of terror: polygamy was legislated, the ferocity of leader Jan van Leiden struck fear into hearts, and non-Anabaptists put to death. Menno knew some of these poor disenfranchised folk, for they came to Witmarsum asking for assistance. He respected their willingness to suffer death, and he was attracted by their impatience with a structured society that had turned religion into a commodity and Christianity into a meaningless cultural signifier. He was especially drawn to them when he heard there was a minority of Anabaptists in the Netherlands who also preached a separate and exclusive church antithetical to sacraments and were willing to follow Christ’s way, the nonviolent, suffering, path of the regenerate. When Münster was destroyed by a cohort of Catholic and Lutheran forces and thousands were executed on a single day, Menno was moved to leave the old church and preach a peaceful, biblicist, and christocentric walk. His intended audience was twofold: (1) the Anabaptists who had fallen prey to the apocalypticism of

Jan van Leiden and who needed shepherding into a separate congregation of only those who would follow Christ literally; (2) the Reformers and Princes who needed to be told that the Anabaptists were nothing but a beleaguered group of pious, peaceful people whose only text was the Gospel of Christ. This was Menno's message in the forty booklets, tracts, and letters that came to constitute his thousand-page literary corpus.

These writings coalesced similar-minded Anabaptists. The Swiss Anabaptists took his name with them to Pennsylvania, the Dutch carried it to Poland and Russia and then to North and South America. But even as they came to be known as the followers of the man named Menno, few Mennonites had a clear idea of who their Menno was. Indeed, the literary corpus Mennonites carried with them from one continent to another was dominated by other books: their songbook, the *Ausbund*; their statement of faith, the *Dordrecht Confession*; and their mythological history, the voluminous *Martyrs Mirror* that provided testimonials of 1,500 Anabaptists who paid the ultimate price. And even among the accounts in the *Martyrs Mirror*, Menno receives only passing mention. So little is known about him, though, that even these details are crucial in giving biographical shape to his post-conversion life. His itinerary is known because the *Martyrs Mirror* contains the testimonies of several Anabaptists put to death for dealings with the fugitive Menno: Tjard Reynolds of Friesland in 1539 for having housed him; Jan Claeszoon of Flanders in 1544 for possessing 600 of his books; a boatman of the River Mass in 1545 for whisking him out of Holland, and so on.

Oral tradition that informs other groups about their leaders is also significantly absent in Menno's case. Indeed, only two frequently retold stories about Menno have survived, or perhaps more correctly, have been created over time. Both suggest why so little is known of him; he was a fugitive and his followers had a vested interest in relaying as little information about him as possible. It is highly unlikely that even these stories came from his followers, for both put the pious Menno in a morally compromising light. The first story is innocuous enough although as Ervin Beck suggests it makes Menno into an "innocent deceiver." A coach carrying Menno is stopped by Anabaptist hunters who demand to know whether Menno is aboard. It so happens that he is riding on the seat with the driver and in answer to the sheriff's query he stoops down, opens the door of the carriage, and thunders

out that they want to know whether Menno “is in there.” The answer from within is “no,” and with this information Menno tells the bounty hunters, “they say Menno Simons is not in the coach.” The second story is more controversial: Menno is preaching in a secluded barn in the Dutch countryside; he is standing atop a casket of molasses, women and children are seated on the ground around him, and the men stand on the barn’s outer edges to guard the clandestine worshippers. Suddenly a cry alerts the pious that the sheriff and his men are approaching. The heavy-set Menno moves to descend from the barrel, but the lid splinters and he finds himself thigh-deep in molasses. Horror sets in when it is realized that if Menno should run now, he would leave an easily detected trail of sweetened sugar. The answer is for the women and children to gather around him and lick the molasses from his boots and trousers. Menno escapes and the church continues growing, although the tale also suggests why the children of Holland had a sweet tongue ever after.<sup>12</sup>

Over the centuries Menno the man remained relatively unknown. Even most of his writings became foreign to Mennonites over time. As both the Dutch and Swiss Anabaptists became Germanized, adopting the German of the Palatinate or of the northern lowlands, most of Menno’s writings remained in Dutch. There was a 1575 German translation of his important *Dat Fundament der Christelychen Leers* which was brought to the New World by Swiss Mennonites and even reprinted along with eight other works during the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> But as Irvin Horst notes, “the editors avoided Menno’s polemical works, which textually made up more than half of his total writings”<sup>14</sup> and, one might conclude, in the process they produced a one-dimensional Menno, a pastoral, quiescent man whose only antipathy was towards the outside corrupted world.

Other eighteenth and early nineteenth-century publication efforts were similarly skewed. In a 1753 work, selected portions of Menno’s writings were translated into German by Dutch pietist Joannes Deknatel. But as Robert Friedmann has argued, the end result of this book, known popularly as *Der Kleine Menno*, was that a “pietistic” Menno Simons was produced. Deknatel ignored the socially charged *Dat Fundament*, presenting only those “selections out of Menno Simons’ works which fit into the new trends of piety . . . . Thus, a good orthodox theologian and exhorter for a more living faith was



well presented, but the great leader of a brotherhood which actualized a true Christian life . . . was dropped.”<sup>15</sup> The first effort by Dutch-Russian Mennonites to translate parts of Menno’s works faced its own handicap. In 1835 when the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites sought to bring reform to the Russia Mennonite community, future bishop Abraham Friesen and his merchant brother Peter von Riesen turned to Menno’s *Dat Fundament* and had it retranslated. However, issuing the book was held up for a decade when Mennonite ministers in Prussia, where it was published, ordered the entire run hidden for fear of aggravating their tenuous relations with Lutheran authorities. As Delbert Plett has observed, even then the book was not widely recognized by the Mennonites in Russia.<sup>16</sup>

Not till the 1870s, when American Mennonites began leaving their isolated communities and began to acquire the English language en masse, did a complete translation of Menno’s known works appear. It is noteworthy that the first translation of these Dutch writings was not into German but into English, and by the Chicago publisher John F. Funk. Thus Menno was reintroduced to the Mennonite world only after American Mennonites had begun assimilating into the mainstream of American society. To halt that assimilation was the clear purpose of Funk’s 1871 English translation: “the writings of a good man, when read with an unbiased mind . . . are always beneficial . . . Such writing may be the means of doing much good among men, especially in these times of worldly conformity in which there is such a great opposition to the cross of Christ; in which men love ease and pleasure and make many devices to avoid those self-denying principles of the religion of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup> To spread the word about Menno, the complete writings were only now further translated into German and issued to the Russian Mennonites.

Still, little was known about Menno the man. True, the 1575 translation of *Dat Fundament* highlighted excerpts from a 1554 writing in which Menno outlined his dynamic “enlightenment, conversion and call.”<sup>18</sup> However, this was but a short period of his entire life. Even though Walter Klaassen has argued that the nineteenth century produced “a very impressive succession of writings on Menno Simons,” he has also contended that those writings bore significant limitations. Mostly they were short and incomplete pieces, emphasizing particular aspects of Menno’s life. An attempt by Heinrich Jung Stilling in 1813 reinforced ideas of Menno the pietist; an 1853 biography by

the Baptist J. Newton Brown created a Baptist Menno, a proponent of immersion baptism; and a 1864 work by Dutch Mennonite J.G. de Hoop Scheffer, “the first to do careful scholarly work . . . using all the existing sources and literature,” was still unsure of Menno’s dates.<sup>19</sup> Although at least eight sympathetic biographical sketches were written, the first comprehensive biography to be “based on accumulated research findings” of the 1800s treated Menno with “a polemical edge.” This 1914 biography, by Dutchman Karel Vos, was the first to ascertain that Menno was born in 1496 and died in 1561. But Vos also conjectured that Menno first learned his Anabaptism from the apocalyptic mystic Melchior Hoffman, that he lied in his writings about knowing no Münsterites, and that his closest confidants, Obbe Philips and others, probably were Münsterites.<sup>20</sup>

The first sympathetic biography of Menno that was as comprehensive as Vos’s was issued in English by an American Mennonite. It would follow the same logic that Funk used in his 1871 translation of Menno’s works. Employing the very biographical detail provided by Vos, American Mennonite leader John Horsch wrote this first English-language biography in 1916, at the time when Mennonites in the U.S. were just beginning to receive unprecedented bad press for their pacifist stance. Horsch’s preface said it all: “the writer has been led by the desire that a better acquaintance with the life and teachings of the earlier heroes of faith may become the common property of all who would follow their footsteps as they follow Christ’s.”<sup>21</sup> Horsch excused Menno for waiting ten years to join the Anabaptists; he was not cowardly but was waiting for the Protestant state-church to carry through reform. Horsch defended him on the issue of the Münsterites by arguing that Menno knew no Münsterites even though he referred to them as his “dear brothers.” Horsch built a selective portrait of Menno whose increasingly harsh views on the ban and shunning were simply ignored and never entered this biography.

Horsch’s work would become the source for one American biography after another, each adding to Menno’s fine image. In 1936 Kansas historian Cornelius Krahn wrote an even more detailed life.<sup>22</sup> Krahn came to be associated with a de-emphasis of Menno’s early ties to mystical and apocalyptic Anabaptism. Menno’s were the cautious words of one who had opposed the Münsterite experiment: “publicly from the pulpit and privately,

he denounced its evils,” Krahn explained, and although Menno “even had some discussions with leaders of the Münsterite movement” he had a reputation of being able to “silence them beautifully.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Menno had attained his ideas from no other source than the scriptures. If anything, he had been influenced by the native Dutch ascetic tradition of “*Devotio Moderna*” and “*Imitatio Christi*” taught by the devout and peaceful Brethren of the Common Life, whose ideas were mediated through the humanists, especially the teaching of Erasmus and refined in the Lutheran-spawned Sacramentarian movement.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Menno was uncouth and unlearned, but these were his very strengths: he was a common man, motivated not by theological intricacies but by the concerns of one who wished nothing more than to attain a life of *Nachfolge Christi* in everyday life. These views also informed the writings of Harold S. Bender, America’s most influential mid-century Mennonite historian. In his 1944 biography, refashioned later for an edition of Menno’s complete writings, Bender produced a Menno exorcised of any social revolutionary tendency: A reader of the later 1956 version saw a Menno who was not only a biblicist but a convert whose experience resounded with the same heartfelt repentance called for by American evangelist Billy Graham, and whose religious practice was nothing less than the most respectable form of Christianity based on the “ideal of practical holiness and the ideal of the high place of the church in the life of the believer.”<sup>25</sup>

The battle over the real Menno was not settled by mid-century American Mennonite Church leaders. During the 1970s a new and iconoclastic school of social historians of Anabaptism arose and challenged the Horsch, Krahn, and Bender views of a biblicist, pacifist, and evangelical Menno. James Stayer of Queen’s University and Werner Packull of the University of Waterloo in Canada were among a group of young historians who emphasized the early Anabaptist links to mysticism and apocalypticism; they were among a new guard of scholars known to advance the “polygenesis school,” drawing attention to Menno’s medievalist ideas, to his ambivalent pacifism that left room for Christian leaders to forcibly eradicate false teachings, and to an ecclesiology that exorcised apocalyptic versions of Anabaptism only after they lost credence among the common people.<sup>26</sup>

During the next decade or so ideas that disparaged Menno spread from the secular academy to the church seminaries. In 1986 Walter Klaassen

concluded that although the study of theology in Menno's works had survived the new interest in social history, writings about Menno were "now much more nuanced and less apologetic."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the leading seminary history textbook on Anabaptism during the mid-1990s, written by C. Arnold Snyder of Conrad Grebel College, declared its "indebtedness" in part to the polygenesis school. In this reading the "great man" Menno took a back seat. Snyder's 430-page text granted Menno a biography of less than one page, and squeezed it in between other short biographies of the "terrorist" Anabaptist Jan van Batenburg, the "spiritualist" David Joris, and the "strict disciplinarians" Dirk Philips and Leenaert Bouwens.<sup>28</sup> Although Snyder applauded Menno's "literal Christocentric hermeneutic" and "high doctrine of regeneration," he was not uncritical: when writing about the ban, for example, Menno lacked "measured judgement," was a "tool" in the hands of younger leaders and "ran aground on the rocks of legalism."<sup>29</sup> Ironically, of the comprehensive scholarly treatments of Menno during the late 1980s and early 1990s, none was as positive as the work of Lutheran scholar Egil Grislis, who published half a dozen articles on Menno in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. Grislis rediscovered in Menno an evangelical biblicist orthodox in his views of religious regeneration and possessed of only an innocuous form of docetic christology.<sup>30</sup>

As the Mennonite laity focused on Menno's 500th birthday in 1996, they were introduced to a rehabilitated Menno yet again. Mennonite newspapers and church magazines lauded him. They reminded their readers of the 1980 conjecture of George Epp, founder of the Mennonite Studies Centre at the University of Winnipeg, that as a priest of the Premonstratensians, who emphasized thorough training, "Menno [must have] received a fairly good education."<sup>31</sup> They were also reminded of Menno's links to Christian humanism. Santa Barbara University historian Abraham Friesen, having turned the radical Thomas Müntzer into a proto-Marxist, now turned Menno into a respectable Erasmian. The two Dutchmen shared witty bombast and an optimistic anthropology, a view of salvation that tied human fate to human goodness. How much better for the Mennonite leader to be linked to the intellectually agile humanist Erasmus than to the apocalyptic mystic Hoffman!<sup>32</sup> As well, popular books now brought together Mennonites of all stripes, from liberal Dutch seminarians to conservative American Old Order

writers, to reproduce the works of Menno, that “anti-clerical leader of the ‘true penitents.’”<sup>33</sup>

In the most important international work of 1996, a celebratory picture book by noted Dutch historian Piet Visser and American scholar Mary Sprunger, yet another laudatory image of Menno arose. True, the book featured forty-five pages of portraits of an invariably somber, bearded, unequivocating Menno, indicating a continued hiatus between the sixteenth-century reformer and the modern permissive Dutch readership. But the Menno in those portraits had been rendered harmless. He was clearly a religious antiquarian. Yet the book made him relevant by making him the courageous icon not merely of the Dutch Mennonite Church, but of Dutch society as a whole. The book’s opening salvo asserted that Menno “was the only Reformer native to the Netherlands.” The modern Dutch could concede that Menno was no magnanimous man: he “shaped” a movement that created “its own New Testament norms” and led a community “both marked and purified by intolerance.”<sup>34</sup> But intolerance no longer mattered. What was important was that Menno’s descendants in the Netherlands rose “on the wings of the new spirit of the young Dutch republic . . . out of the dark swamps of death and oppression to the shining summits of peace and prosperity.” Menno was not the ultimate Dutchman, but he was foundational for the ultimate Dutch identity.

Little was known about Menno Simons the man until the twentieth century. Large sections of his massive writings remained hidden in the Dutch language until the late nineteenth century. As the Mennonites who bore his name forgot the Dutch language and took on a variety of German dialects, they would continue to know the martyrologies, hymns, and confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Anabaptists, but they would know little of Menno himself. When Dutch biographers did write about him in detail early in the twentieth century, they described someone who was a curious mix of intolerance and equivocation. It was the American Mennonites, caught in an increasingly intrusive society, who found in Menno an evangelical man, soundly biblical and committed to christocentric ethics. Such a man was useful to American youth in search of a mentor. A more sceptical social history-based academy demoted Menno; he was the late arrival, propounding

a strange doctrine, given to easy dichotomization. But in 1996, scholars returned to regenerate Menno. He was a well-trained intellectual, an optimistic Erasmian humanist, the only Dutch reformer, an anti-clerical champion of common people. For the moment he had once again become an icon.

What will happen to Menno as Mennonites seek grist for their collective identity in a new century remains to be seen. We may not find any new sources, but that will not stop us from making another Menno.

## Notes

I would like to thank Arnold Snyder and Al Reimer for commenting on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> See: Robert Harney, "Caboto and Other *Parentela*: the Uses of the Italian Canadian Past" *Arrangiaris: The Italian Immigration Experience in Canada*, eds. R. Perin and F. Sturino (Montreal: Guernica, 1989); Carl J. Tracie, *'Toil and Peaceful Life': Doukhobor Village Settlement in Saskatchewan, 1899-1918* (Regina, 1996); Francis Swyripa, "Models for Their Sex: Princess Olha and the Cossack Mother," in *Wedded to a Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991* (Toronto, 1993); Gerhard P. Bassler, *The German Canadian Mosaic Today and Yesterday: Identities, Roots and Heritage* (Ottawa, 1991); John W. Friesen, "Pacifism and Anastasia's Doukhobor Village," *Alberta History* 41 (1993); Vladimir J. Kaye (Kysilewsky) and Francis Swyripa, "Settlement and Colonisation" in *A Heritage in Transition: Essays in the History of Ukrainians in Canada*, ed. Manoly R. Lupul (Ottawa, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See articles on events commemorating Menno's birth in the *Mennonite Reporter*, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See: Harold S. Bender, "A Brief Biography of Menno Simons" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 1-29.

<sup>4</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 70.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Loewen, *No Permanent City: Stories From Mennonite History and Life* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Menno Simons, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine, 1539" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 103-226.

<sup>7</sup> Harold S. Bender, "Michael Sattler," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* IV, 431; C. Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Bender, "Sattler," 427-34.

<sup>9</sup> Bender, "A Brief Biography," 14; Cornelius Krahn, "Menno Simons," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III, 577; George K. Epp, "The Spiritual Roots of Menno Simons," *Mennonite Images*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg, MB: 1980), 51-59.

<sup>10</sup> Harold S. Bender, "Mennonite," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III, 586.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ervin Beck, "Mennonite Trickster Tales: True to be Good," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (1987): 58-74.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius Krahn, "Foundation," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* II, 359.

<sup>14</sup> Irvin Horst, "The Meaning of Menno Simons Today" in George R. Brunk, ed., *Menno Simons: A Reappraisal* (Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite College, 1992), 165.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1949), 126.

<sup>16</sup> Delbert Plett, *The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812-1849* (Steinbach, MB: DFP Publications, 1985), 321-24.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Funk, Introduction to *The Complete Works of Menno Simons Translated from the Original Dutch or Holland* (Elkhart, IN: John F. Funk and Brother, 1871), i.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Horst, "The Meaning of Menno Simons Today," 165.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Klaassen, "Menno Simons Research, 1837-1937, 1986-1990" in Brunk, ed., *Menno Simons: A Reappraisal*, 181-98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> John Horsch, *Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1916).

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Krahn, *Menno Simons* (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1936).

<sup>23</sup> Cornelius Krahn, "Menno Simons," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III, 578.

<sup>24</sup> Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Life, Spread and Thought* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968).

<sup>25</sup> Bender, "A Brief Biography," 29.

<sup>26</sup> James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1979); Werner Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement, 1525-1531* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Walter Klaassen, "Menno Simons Research, 1937-1986," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (1986): 497-508.

<sup>28</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History*, 150-53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 339ff.

<sup>30</sup> Egil Grisliis, "Menno Simons' Account of His Conversion and Call in the Light of the Bible," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 3 (1985): 73-82; "Good Works According to Menno Simons," *JMS* 5 (1987): 120-137; "The Doctrine of Incarnation According to Menno Simons," *JMS* 8 (1990): 16-33; "Menno Simons as a Devout Disciple of the Apostle Paul," *JMS* 9 (1991): 54-72; "Menno Simons on the Lord's Supper," *JMS* 10 (1992): 130-50; "Menno Simons on Conversion: Compared with Martin Luther and John Calvin," *JMS* 11 (1993): 55-75; "Martin Luther and Menno Simons on Infant Baptism." *JMS* 12 (1994): 7-25.

<sup>31</sup> George K. Epp, "The Spiritual Roots of Menno Simons" in *Mennonite Images*, ed., Harry Loewen (Winnipeg, MB: 1980), 51-59.

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Friesen, "Present at the Inception: Menno Simons and the Beginings of Dutch Anabaptism," *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 58 (1996): 8-12.

<sup>33</sup> Sjouke Voolstra, "Introduction," *Menno Simons: Confession of My Enlightenment, Conversion and Calling* (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 1996), xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Piet Visser and Mary S. Sprunger, *Menno Simons: Places, Portraits and Progeny*. Trans. Gary K. Waite (Altona, MB: Friesens, 1996) Original edition Krommenie: Knijnenberg, 1996.

# **Cloth, Constraint and Creativity: The Engendering of Material Culture Among the Holdeman Mennonites**

*Linda Boynton Arthur*

Clothing reveals both the themes and the formal relationships which serve a culture as orienting ideas, and the real or imagined basis according to which cultural categories are organized . . . . [Consequently] the principles of a world are found woven into the fabric of its clothing.<sup>1</sup>

The world of the Holdeman Mennonites is one in which cloth, constraint, and creativity are interwoven; it is rich in meaning, especially as it pertains to the engendering of women and their material culture.<sup>2</sup> Clothing, in particular, is a vehicle for the expression of both conformity and deviance. The power of bodily adornment has been made visible through acts of rebellion and resistance<sup>3</sup> because in the act of dressing, we negotiate the awkward territory between the intensely personal and the socially constructed layers of social life that are filled with prescriptions and proscriptions. At the same time, an analysis of dress allows us to examine male-female differences and the struggles involved in constructing gendered identities.<sup>4</sup>

Cloth functions both to constrain and liberate women in Holdeman Mennonite society. This paper describes how the Holdeman Mennonites' dress code constrains women's bodies. It will explore, by contrast, the role of quilted cloth in this society in relation to quilting as a creative art form. Holdeman women use cloth to create stunning quilts as a means of self-expression. They use cloth both overtly and covertly to negotiate their way through this patriarchal society; they simultaneously repress individuality through clothing, then allow it free rein in quilting, which may be seen as

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*Linda Boynton Arthur is associate professor and curator in the Textiles and Clothing Department, University of Hawaii at Manoa.*



a form of collective resistance to the constraints imposed on them by the patriarchs.

### **Historical Background**

Holdeman Mennonites began arriving in America in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Their roots are in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when their Anabaptist forebears organized disciplined communities of believers and stressed literal interpretation of the Bible. Known as the 'Plain People' for their avoidance of fashionable clothing, Anabaptists were branded as heretics and frequently migrated to avoid religious persecution.

Dissension has been a long-standing problem for the Plain People; the Amish broke off from the main body of Mennonites in the late seventeenth century before the migrations to North America began in the eighteenth century. In spite of religious differences, the Plain groups often settled in the same areas. Differences over interpretation of the New Testament, symbolized by adoption of new styles and technologies, led to numerous groups, like the Holdemans, breaking off from the Old Mennonite Church.

The Holdemans are among the most conservative of Mennonite groups, and see themselves as a reform movement in that they require members to remain constant to old separatist traditions that other Mennonite groups have abandoned. What links social control and clothing norms is the historical pattern of Mennonite separation from the world. Holdemans believe there are two kingdoms, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world. Although they are here in the physical world, the Holdeman Mennonites believe they belong to the Kingdom of God. They repeatedly state that they are *in* this world, but not *of* it. Historically, the integrity of their separation from the world was easier to maintain while they were physically isolated in remote communities. However, that separation ended because of the population pressures of an expanding nation and the resultant impacts of their own interacting with outsiders on their cultural cohesiveness. The threat was met by retaining many of their old traditions, including plain dress, which had merely been a custom but became formalized in both proscribed and prescribed codes. Separation became symbolic as well as physical.

Throughout Mennonite history, the clothing styles adopted by various sects were similar to those of other Plain People in that they resembled the

styles of the time but were very plain. Citing a philosophy reiterated by the Holdemans, Jacob Krehbiel, a nineteenth century Mennonite minister, stated that “excessive display in clothing manifests on the outside what is hidden in the heart.”<sup>6</sup> The Holdemans claim that a lack of emphasis on external beauty leads to the expression of spirituality.<sup>7</sup> To justify their distinctive dress, they cite the Apostle Paul’s instructions that women should focus on spiritual matters and show that otherworldliness in modest and sober dress.

### **Researching setting and methods**

Bend, a tiny river town in Northern California, is a Holdeman Mennonite farming community.<sup>8</sup> While most of the men are farmers, all of the married women are housewives, and families average five children. Beyond Bend, the community interacts extensively with other Holdeman congregations; they are linked through marriage as well, since the Holdemans are religiously endogamous. Approximately half of the young women leave Bend to marry men from other congregations. The combination of endogamy, patrilocal residence, and rarity of converts leads to a community in which most people are related (at least distantly) to each other as well as to the many expelled Holdemans who continue to live in Bend.

The current study culminates eight years of ethnographic fieldwork with the Bend congregation.<sup>9</sup> Data was gathered through participant observation, casual interviews, and focused group interviews, and from libraries and Mennonite archives. Before my ethnography little had been published on the Holdeman Mennonites, who avoid publicity.<sup>10</sup> Since rules were passed down orally, codes of behavior had to be investigated through qualitative techniques. My fieldwork included attendance at church services, Sunday school meetings, school classrooms, weddings, pot-luck dinners, youth group activities, quilting bees, and numerous informal gatherings in women’s homes. I collected most of the data through 100 interviews: eighty-eight percent of the adult women under the age of fifty, seventy-five percent of the older women, and all of the young unmarried women were interviewed. I also interviewed seventy-five percent of the local expelled members. Having survived the expulsion process, these people were acutely aware of the power of social control in Mennonite society. Expulsion was the most severe form of control used by the Holdemans to insure conformity to their social norms.<sup>11</sup>

**Constraint, dress, and tradition**

As a “a mirror to the soul,” Holdeman Mennonite dress provides a visual display of conformity and religiosity. Sociologically, it does more than this. Dress and, by extension, the body, are the sites where different symbolic and gendered meanings are constructed and contested; such symbols arise from pressure to create consonance between physiological and social experiences. While compliance with group norms or personal control is required for all Holdeman Mennonites, for women of the community, constraints involve both formal and informal controls on almost every facet of life.<sup>12</sup> The church community, through its men, regulates social roles and social activities. If there is no specific rule, then usually a custom dictates the correct procedure for any activity. Diversity in any manner is frowned on. Following tradition is the rule, a requirement which leads to homogeneity in the community. Nevertheless, the women experience a measure of ambivalence. They find comfort in sameness but yearn for variety, especially in clothing and quilting.

Although Holdeman Mennonites as a group feel threatened by the outside world, women in addition feel threatened by the men of the community. Because the women’s need for variety and self-expression is reflected through subtle variations in their dress, clothing is a source of conflict between them and the men. In this conflict men exercise control, with ministers having the most power. Women, however, walk a fine line between obedience to the norms and self-assertion when they react to the control exercised by men.

Plagued by anxiety, women maneuver in a subtle manner. Through deviance from the norms, they attempt to change the details of their traditional dress. In doing so they confront the established image and carefully fashion an alternative to it, resisting what appear to be overwhelming constraints. Subtle changes in dress, then, function symbolically to establish solidarity among women and to circumvent patriarchal control. In the years before marriage, young women bend the dress code, and their mothers look the other way. Thus the control of women’s clothing by ministers as well as the ways women resist it represent a negotiation of symbolic meaning of the material culture. Because women know the meanings involved in dress and do not blindly conform to the code, they become skilled practitioners at bending constraints through nuanced alterations. From this perspective, neither social control nor

collective resistance is clear-cut. These issues are negotiated in everyday interaction in even the most tightly controlled communities.

Since resistance to change is characteristic of Holdeman culture, the changes that do occur are minute. Nevertheless the tension between agency and constraint, or power and resistance, becomes apparent in these subtle struggles over the symbolic meaning of women's dress, defined by the Mennonite social body as it exerts control over women's bodies. Since strict conformity is equated with religiosity, compliance to strict codes of behavior is demanded. While a woman's level of religiosity cannot be objectively perceived, symbols such as clothing are evidence that she is on the "right and true path." Appearance is constantly scrutinized and interpreted as a measure of her relative level of religiosity. If the symbol of clothing is interpreted negatively, she is defined as deviant and subjected to formal and informal constraints. Women and their dress are controlled not only by the men but by the community at large. "When I put on Mennonite clothing, I put on all of the Church's rules," said Becky, a young Holdeman woman.

The codification of non-conformist practices among many American Mennonite groups began in the late nineteenth century, and because clothing was considered symbolic of acquiescence to authority, rigid dress codes resulted in several churches.<sup>13</sup> From the early days of their church the Holdemans have focused on maintaining strict boundaries between members and outsiders, and adopted more rigid symbols of social separation than other groups.<sup>14</sup> One of the specific concerns of John Holdeman's reform movement of the 1850s was that Mennonites had begun to dress more like the external society since their relocation to North America. Holdeman interpreted this practice as symbolizing the loss of distinctiveness. Following his break from the larger body of Mennonites, he insisted his followers wear clothing that indicated their conservatism and separation from the world. He prescribed a dress code for women, characterized by a long dress with a high neck, loose bodice, and fitted waist. Jewelry, cosmetics, and the cutting and styling of hair were prohibited.<sup>15</sup>

While for Holdeman men clothing has changed with the times, for women the overall dress and adornment practices have stayed rather consistent with nineteenth-century practices. Women wear shirtwaist dresses, typified by a wide, long skirt and a fitted bodice with buttons down the center

to the waist. There is generally a small collar and belt. Holdeman men, by contrast, cannot be easily differentiated from other non-Mennonite farmers by their appearance. There are no specific dress requirements for men, other than the expectation that they dress plainly. As R.W. Connell notes, patriarchal societies perpetuate inequality by creating social categories in which a focus on the body becomes central to the ideological construction of differences between men and women.<sup>16</sup> The Holdeman case supports Connell's thesis. While the Holdemans state that clothing, like all of life, has to be brought under the scrutiny of New Testament standards, in reality only women face that scrutiny. "Women wear a black head covering over uncut hair pinned into a bun to symbolize the woman's submission to God and her husband," said Mary, one of the Holdeman women. The head covering is a flat black scarf that looks like a cap when pinned correctly around the bun; it is the most regulated item of women's dress. The women's attire attests not only to separation from the external society but to separation of the sexes. This important distinction is rooted in the perception of natural gender differences that underlies the Holdemans' patriarchal social system.

### **Bodily constraint and clothing**

The Holdeman social body controls the expression of identity through rigid norms for dress and behavior. The wearing of traditional Mennonite dress indicates a woman's willingness to submit to the control of the church and its dictates. Objective evaluation of a person's commitment to the faith is impossible, so symbolic measures are substituted. Those who stray from the social norms are considered deviants and castigated through both internal and external social control. While behavior in general is scrutinized, external forms of self-expression are most closely monitored. Because appearance is considered the external manifestation of inner attitudes, visual cues are analyzed for signs of non-conformity. As Sarah explained about a friend's expulsion, "She was ill, spiritually ill. We could all see it in her dress and her behavior – she was just out of control."

At issue is conformity to social norms rationalized by religious dogma. What the Holdemans regard as signs of religiosity are, from the perspective of this work, signs of socio-religious conformity. Intra-group relations involve a hierarchy that evaluates conformity, religiosity, social embeddedness

(involvement), and ultimately, the assignment of status. At the top of this stratified system are orthodox members who conform to the norms, are thoroughly enculturated, and are thought highly religious. They dress modestly. Lower status is accorded to members who deviate from many of the social norms and are therefore considered less religious. These marginal members are often young women who have not sufficiently repressed their sexuality. As they learn to control and repress it, they become more enculturated, and there is a corresponding decrease in external constraints imposed by the group.

Control of female sexuality is essential in Christianity; control of the self is at the center of Christianity's ethic of anti-sexuality. Cultural attempts to control the body and its urges only makes them more powerful and more in need of control.<sup>17</sup> Because female sexuality is considered both powerful and threatening to the society, women have been restricted from becoming ministers in the most conservative Mennonite churches. Occasionally, older women are allowed to minister, but they are very aware of the need to control their dress. Agatha, a minister, stated that by wearing make-up and fancy clothing, women "arouse men and keep them from concentrating on the sermon."<sup>18</sup> In the Holdeman community, strict control of female sexuality begins during puberty when a girl's clothing undergoes a dramatic change. Girls may choose from a variety of dress styles until puberty, when a transition occurs to the one style available to adult women. "The pressure increases continually," Judith explained. "There is almost no restriction on little kids clothing, but there's less choice as we get older so by the time we are in the youth group [16 to married] there's a uniform. This is to control sexuality." Her sister, Beth, elaborated on this theme when she said that "clothing shows sexual repression, because it has to change in adolescence; it has to become more standard before you can marry." At the same time, both sexuality and its repression by the culture are regarded ambivalently. Girls start using clothing for sexual display at the same time ministers are overtly repressing sexuality. As they sew their dresses, girls use numerous design details to call attention to the body; more overtly, they adjust the garment fit. Depending on how closely the dress hugs the body, it can either conceal or reveal female contours. While older, orthodox women will wear the dress fitted loosely and wear girdles to control movement, young women do the opposite. They abide by the overall

dress code but use the fit of the garment to show off their sexuality during the brief time available (about three years) to find a husband. Young women design dresses with additional details to draw attention to the bodice. A young expelled woman stated:

You want to be married at eighteen. If you're not married by twenty-one you're an old maid . . . so you put more detail in your dresses, and fit the bodice as tight as you can. One time a Mormon guy asked me why the Mennonite girls make dresses with four lines pointing at the breasts. Well, the darts really *do* call attention to the bust!

John, an expelled man, stated that "Young women have to keep their sexuality under control, but also be attractive to the guys and still meet the letter of the law." They must carefully walk the line between modesty and immodesty.

Once a young woman has "caught a man," said Rosanna, "there's no need to put so much time into a wardrobe. Besides, pregnancy usually comes right away." After the first pregnancy, said Leah, "They *expect you to calm down* [her emphasis] – to dress more plain. And you've probably gained weight with the baby, and if you don't be careful, you'll get fat and lazy and then be out of control, and in trouble for that, too." As Mary said, "It's good to look sexy, but only for your husband. But if you look sexually attractive to others, you'll get in trouble. Your best friends will warn you to dress more modestly, and ministers will attack you and look for signs of sin." Through awareness of this level of scrutiny, a woman exerts personal social control. When friends and ministers speak with her about her inability to repress her sexuality, informal social control measures are thereby enacted.

Because rigid conformity is the norm for the Holdemans, it does not take much to be labeled deviant. Ministers continually watch marginal members for behaviors that can be so interpreted. This results in an unequal enforcement of the rules. Jane was orthodox, but her sister was considered marginal. The sister recalled a visit from the ministers in which she was criticized for many things, including the dress she was wearing and had borrowed from her orthodox sibling. "Jane wore it many times after I did, and never was reproved for it. I was the only one who was. And it was because they saw me as a threat . . . . The ministers always kept their eyes on me." Jane was

the plain daughter in the family, while her sister had a voluptuous body and beautiful hair, which became a curse. Female sexuality is threatening to individual men who may feel out of control themselves; it threatens the patriarchy, and as Bryan Turner noted, must therefore be controlled.<sup>19</sup> Jane explained why the ministers expelled her sister: “The ministers were afraid of her – she is so pretty, and she wasn’t willing to submit. They couldn’t get anything on her, really, except for clothes, which was what they harped on, but we often dressed alike and they never bothered me.”

The appearance of orthodox women clearly manifest personal control. Emma, a minister’s daughter, is married to a minister and has ten children. As a role model she diets and dresses plainly, and wears dark, solid-colored dresses with no detail other than the required belts, collars, and buttons. Interestingly, she makes hand-worked buttonholes for the buttons (as many as twelve per dress) that require weeks to complete. Although few women do this, she says it protects her from accusations of “dressing fancy.” Hand-worked buttonholes evidence her commitment to conservative dress and old-fashioned ways while simultaneously calling attention to her plainness. This use of old-fashioned behaviors as a means of asserting religiosity while simultaneously drawing attention to it is not uncommon among orthodox people, and can be a source of trouble if perceived as prideful behavior. However, the use of these behaviors concurrently expresses Emma’s orthodoxy and high-status social location.

Among the Holdemans, religious orthodoxy, lineage, and material wealth determine status. As with the Hasidic Jews in Williamsburg, New York,<sup>20</sup> status in the community is reflected in ethno-religious clothing. Charity is a minister’s daughter whose mother is known for her highly orthodox dress. When asked about her mother’s conservative clothing, Charity stated that minister’s families have to set examples. In her heart, Mother despises arguments and confrontations. The plain clothing is her way of avoiding confrontations. “Interestingly, there can be pride in humility as expressed in clothing. Following a church service, I overheard a man say to his wife, “Mother, I believe we were the plainest ones there!”

Holdeman women are subjected to informal methods of social control, ranging from gossip to reproof. Gossip is the most frequent variety of informal control. Women spend much time in the company of their friends,



with other members of the community as the main topic of conversation. When she breaks a norm, a woman knows the transgression will be noticed and become a current topic of conversation. If that is ineffective in redirecting her behavior, her best friends will talk to her directly and utter their concern about her spirituality as an expression of Christian love. Members are continually aware of clothing and use it as a gauge of a person's submission to the will of the church. In discussing the expulsion of her aunt, Anna remembered, "It was so sudden. There were no signs that she was in trouble – no changes in her behavior. Even her clothing was the same – I'd have expected to see some changes, like her dresses getting fancy or something." Any signs of individuality are seen as signs of rejection of group norms and values. Naturally, the expression of individuality in clothing cannot be ignored. A minister's daughter, Judith, who left the church at nineteen but still lives in Bend, concluded:

If your clothes are straight down the lines as to the rules of the group, then everyone can see that you are submitting your will to the church. The Mennonite dress is like a uniform – it indicates that you're keeping everything under control. When you're having trouble with the [church's] rules, your clothing can show it. This is why everyone watches what everyone else is wearing and how they are wearing it, because clothing shows acceptance of all the rules of the church.

In theory every Christian has the right to monitor another Christian's behavior, but in practice high status (religiously orthodox) individuals reprove marginal and low status individuals. John noted that "those who reprove others are of a high status. Status is determined by how much you believe in what the church is teaching, and how verbal you are in expressing that belief." John's sister-in-law remarked:

It's a status thing if you can criticize someone else's dress for being too loud, or worldly, or fancy, so if you can reprove someone, you have power . . . but no one listens to anyone who hasn't established that power. I'd buckle under to the ministers and their wives.

Women are reprovved (by men) for various infractions, particularly clothing. "Men do not get reprovved very often: women are reprovved by men in order to

control them . . . but certain women do not get reproved,” said one member in a group interview. Her friends concurred. Women prone to reproof are assertive, or from low-status families, and have not totally internalized the social norms. Because they are not suitably controlled on a personal level, they are defined as deviant and subjected to constant scrutiny and informal reproofs. However, if these are ineffective, formal measures are used to encourage compliance. At this point, the marginal member generally gets into what is called “church trouble.” This term is used by the Holdemans to describe formal social control.

As the most salient clothing symbol for Holdeman women, the head covering is an extraordinarily powerful symbol of the control of their bodies by the social body; it is imbued with great emotion and meaning. The head covering represents a woman’s acceptance of the patriarchal social structure, and its symbolic power was especially apparent to expelled women who immediately removed it when they left the church. They reported an incredible sense of freedom with the removal of the covering. (Often cutting off their hair followed this action.) The head covering’s symbolic power lasts a long time in the minds of ex-Mennonites. Judith left the church twenty years ago but returns annually to visit her family in Georgia, and prior to these difficult visits she has dreams about the head covering:

I have had dreams that I had to put the head covering back on – it’s like a horror dream. And I have woken up in horror . . . I feel such pressure to do as they want. Before I go back to that community, I have to be in that mold . . . I think it’s from all of the years of living around them and knowing that is what they expect.

Social control of the body is both overt and covert in Holdeman society. The ability of the body to visually represent numerous facets of the self is acknowledged by the Holdeman Mennonites, who want their people to experience a uniformly religious self. When that occurs, overt and formal control measures such as reproof and expulsion are not needed, since personal control is adequate to prevent conflict. Becky, who had been expelled five times and wore fashionable clothing during that period, explained how clothing illustrated integration of the personal and social self, on the body:

“When I grew to appreciate that God wants me in the church, I no longer wanted worldly clothes. Eventually, putting on the Mennonite clothes and head covering felt right.” She described a crisis of identity that was visually apparent, with her clothes and body as the focus of the conflict. Clothing can symbolize not just group affiliation but enculturation of group norms.

There is no mindless subjugation of self in the Holdeman community. While the women may appear submissive, their motivations are complex. They reinforce the dress norms while also resisting the image proscribed for them by ministers through numerous subtle changes in the dress code.<sup>21</sup> While there is overt submission, on a covert level there is collective resistance which supports women’s dissension. Women monitor their own and each other’s behavior to protect themselves from men’s control. They simultaneously protect themselves from male censure and fashion an alternative image to counteract the one prescribed by men. An individual alone is unable to bend the rules, but women as a group can make small changes in the codes. While sewing clothing that will lend itself toward self-expression is prohibited, no restriction attaches to sewing items for the home, particularly quilts. Because quilting is a traditional activity with a functional basis, creativity here is neither controlled nor repressed.

### **Creativity through quilted cloth**

By working together, Mennonite women are able to balance the restrictions imposed by ministers with some measure of individual expression. Although the needle arts with regard to sewing garments are constrained by the community, creativity and individuality are not only allowed but celebrated in another form of material culture, quilting. Because this form of self-expression does not involve the body, it is less regulated by the patriarchy. The creation of quilts is the one avenue of artistic expression allowed to Holdeman women. It becomes an empowering form of female agency for women who find artistic outlet in designing and creating stunning quilts. Here Holdeman women resist the social control of their bodies.

Developed from a functional need for warmth in the bedrooms of unheated houses during the Renaissance, quilting originated in Europe and was an activity generally pursued by the upper classes. When the Mennonites left Europe due to religious persecution, they left most of their possessions behind.

They came from a peasant background and thus did not bring the art of quilting to America; rather they learned to quilt from English women living alongside them in the American Colonies. Fabric was scarce in the Colonies due to a trade embargo by the British, who did not want the Colonists to develop their own textile industry. Colonial women learned to make bedcovers from remnants and used fabric; hence the American patchwork quilt was born. Frugality and self-sufficiency, clearly established in Mennonite society prior to the migration to America,<sup>22</sup> allowed patchwork to fit neatly into their value system. Although quilting began as a salvage technology, with functionalism a dominant value, American quilters started experimenting with patterns and techniques to make visually exciting quilts. This happened by the nineteenth century for most American quilters, but has only recently begun among Holdeman Mennonites. The salvage aspect of quilting is rapidly diminishing as the Holdeman quilters strive for aesthetic impact. As Susan Shantz notes: “While quilts literally keep people warm, they are layered as well with social and symbolic warmth. Emotional warmth is embodied in the completed quilt, so that it becomes difficult to commodify – to translate the worth of the hand-made object into dollars and cents. Like other products and work associated with women, they have a substantial aspect of ‘gift labor’ . . . women are supposed to labor out of love for their families and communities.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Creating a quilt**

There are three layers to a quilt – a quilt top (where the design resides), the filling, and the backing. The three layers are joined together by hand stitching with sometimes quite elaborate motifs. In constructing the quilt top, quilters use two main techniques. The “pieced” quilt top is composed of small pieces of fabric cut out in predetermined shapes and joined together in blocks where a repeating geometric design is achieved through the assembly of blocks pieced together. Alternatively, the “applied” quilt is made by cutting a design out of folded fabric, much like children cut paper snowflakes. The design is cut into a piece of colored fabric, and the raw edges are turned under and stitched down to the top of a plain background. Through color contrast, the design is revealed. Freed from the limitations which geometry imposes upon the pieced

quilt, the applique technique allows for infinite variety in design. But the applique technique is not used by Holdeman quilters. “It just makes no sense to buy fabric, then cut it all up and sew it to another piece of goods – and that’s doubly wasteful since one piece covers another,” said Rebecca. Her sister Margaret added, “Well, the problem would be that the ministers would notice – it is such a fancy way to make a quilt and would be a sign of pride. Not just because it’s so hard to do, but because it’s so different, and not traditional.”

Historically, a number of sources for designs were available to quilters. Some were simply geometric figures found in other places and times and in other mediums. Such designs as Baby Blocks, Nine-Patch and its many variations, and the many star patterns are often found in architectural decorations. Some designs, such as the Wild Goose Chase, were direct visual abstractions of objects and natural images, yet other patterns, like the Schoolhouse, were direct images. A smaller number, of which the Drunkard’s Path is a good example, were visual representations of ideas. Most designs were given names meaningful to the makers and drawn from the whole realm of their experience: among the prime sources of inspiration were nature and religion.<sup>24</sup> This final category of designs based on significant religious and natural experiences was the prime source of inspiration for Mennonite quilters. A well-known pattern from the Kansas plains, Turkey Tracks, is occasionally seen in a Holdeman home. Ruth noted that “we call this design ‘Wandering Feet’ because it is bad luck to put this quilt on the bed of a young man, for fear he might wander away from the community.” The lessons of Holdeman society are found in cloth.

Traditionally, Mennonites have readily adopted patterns from their neighbors. Simpler designs, such as Nine Patch, Four Patch, and Pinwheel were very common. More complicated designs such as Baskets, Tree of Life, Star of Bethlehem, and the Double Wedding Ring were examples of English quilt patterns used by the groups. Holdeman quilters use print and solid cotton fabrics of pastel colors in most of their quilts. Borders of Mennonite quilts are generally quite narrow, and the hand quilting was traditionally intended to be functional rather than decorative. Today, though, it can be quite elaborate; feather motifs in the stitching are most common.

Quilt themes often run in families. Mary's mother, Rebecca, generally made floral quilts with large designs such as sunflowers. Mary explained that she too prefers flower designs. In creating a pieced quilt top, she explained that

as the mother, I get to choose the design, but I usually have my girls cut out the pieces. First, I spend lots of time thinking of what I want the quilt to look like; as often as not I get the idea from something here on the farm. The idea for this one (referring to a quilt in a frame) came to me when I was watering my flowerbed. I noticed that the tulips were pretty much made of rectangles and triangles, so I figured piecing a tulip quilt could be pretty easy!

Once she had designed the pattern, Mary sought the advice of her friends and sisters as to color choices. They poured out boxes of fabric scraps onto the living room floor and sorted through them to get prints with vibrant hues, a process that took an entire day. Mary later made another tulip quilt but purchased all the fabric (in solid broadcloth, rather than prints) for the top in bright colors, which she referred to as "crayon" colors.

It is customary for the quilt top to be pieced at home but quilted at a quilting bee. Like most American quilts, the majority of Holdeman quilts are assembled in a block pattern. (The block method is one in which a repeating geometric design is achieved through the assembly of identical blocks later pieced together to form the quilt top.) Most of the families in this community have at least fifteen quilts in use at a time. Holdeman women make more quilt tops than they can find time to quilt; it is not unusual to have six quilt tops in storage.

Quilting (in the home) is saved for the winter months when daily farm work makes fewer demands on the agrarian woman. Because quilting frames take up so much room, there is a concerted effort to finish the quilt quickly. (The Holdemans do not purchase commercially available quilting frames designed for a solitary quilter to work at for an extended period in a minimal amount of space.) A quilting bee not only helps a woman to get her quilt finished rapidly, it also satisfies the need for social contact for women whose responsibilities confine them to the home. Like many Canadian and American pioneers, Mennonites have traditionally gathered to husk corn, build a barn, or stitch a quilt. These are all forms of mutual aid important in the preservation of community.

**The social fabric of the community**

Historically, quilting played a role in the social fabric of Mennonite communities. Churches made quilts for appreciation gifts to people in the community and for fundraising and missionary efforts. As women met together to quilt, they not only visited but assembled to reinforce the values of Mennonite life and thought.<sup>25</sup> In the Holdeman community, the quilting bee is often referred to as ‘sewing circle.’

Sewing circle is a formal quilting bee held at the church once a month. During this day-long session, the women of the church and their pre-school children gather to sew, gossip, and eat a spectacular meal. Quilts vary in complexity, and several simple quilts produced for missions may be finished in a day; these are yarn-tied rather than hand-stitched. Often, the focus of sewing circles is the production of tied quilts for the needy, a long-standing Mennonite tradition.<sup>26</sup> A traditional pieced quilt assembled with hand-stitching may take several sessions to complete, depending on the number of women at the quiltings. The whole community of women come together at sewing circle. Not only is it a break in the routine of farm life, but it is a place to exchange ideas, patterns, and information. Creativity and individuality are allowed free reign.

The quilting frame, composed of four eight-foot pine boards on corner supports, takes up most of the space in a room. To this frame the quilters tack in the quilt backing, on top of which they lay the filling and finally the quilt top. All three layers are securely tacked to the frame and then basted. Finally, the quilting design is drawn on with chalk or pencil. Templates or patterns are used to draw the exact motifs that will be stitched. At this point, the quilt is ready to be stitched and the quilting bee begins. Everyone has a place at the frame, and left-handers such as myself are placed on corners so that the work proceeds smoothly.<sup>27</sup>

Traditionally, Holdeman quilts have been made of cotton print fabric scraps left over from sewing clothing, and as a result the designs were somewhat random in appearance. Over time, quilters began to put blocks created with scraps between blocks of plain fabric in order to make the designs more apparent. Following that, borders and sashing were done in the same fabric, further refining the design. Since the 1980s, it has been common in Bend for Holdeman quilters to plan, conceive, and design a quilt totally out of

new fabric purchased intentionally for it. In this community, quilting is no longer just a salvage technology, but has become a means of aesthetic expression. Here, all Holdeman women quilt, even those who don't enjoy sewing and have seamstresses to make the family's clothing.

### **Creativity and quilting**

"Sometimes it seems that all I do is rush about, taking care of Will and the children. I so look forward to quilting, since that is time I can sit still. I love quilting in the early spring, when all it does is rain" (Ruth). Quilting hits a chord of creativity in Holdeman women who might otherwise feel constrained. "It seems like I have twenty dresses that look the same but are of different fabrics. With quilts, each one is totally different" (Martha). Rose hated to sew clothes, and paid a sister-in-law to make all the family's clothing. Nonetheless, she loved to quilt, for much the same reason cited by Martha. She said: "I love planning my quilts, and often awake in the night with ideas that send me into my sewing room. I enjoy making them because they're all so unique – I always have at least ten tops waiting to be quilted."

Since Sunday afternoons are set aside for visiting, the house is made as attractive as possible. Women wear their nicer dresses to church and put the prettiest quilts on all the beds before visitors arrive for Sunday supper. "You have to be careful not to be too proud about your fancy quilts," said Ruth. "It's clear that fine quilts show that you haven't had idle hands, but you need to take care not to be prideful." As long as a quilter assumes a humble stance, her extraordinary needlework testifies to her artistic skill and talent.

Outsiders have asked why the Holdeman Mennonites, who are devoutly committed to avoiding the fashions of the world, make beautiful, eye-catching quilts? Is it a contradiction that these plain and simple people, who disdain fashion and prideful behavior, cultivate exquisite artistry in quilt making? There is no denying that life in Holdeman Mennonite communities is rigidly disciplined; all behavior is affected by the religious belief system and enforced by strong social pressure. But these boundaries have distinct advantages: there is security in knowing the limits, and freedom within the boundaries. Among these people beauty is handled gingerly. There is no room for pride within their culture, and regulations on dress and lifestyle exist in part to squelch temptations toward vanity. But the line here is delicate. In work, a job well



done is imperative, yet pride in that job is not tolerated. There are few exceptions, but quilting is one of them. It is an avenue where a woman may show off her skills and abilities unashamedly. Quilting gives her a vehicle for the expression of feelings otherwise restricted. This freedom allows women the opportunity for creativity in a world of limited options. Through quilting, utilitarian objects are elevated through imagination, enterprise, and love to the status of an original art form.

Why do Mennonite women who have so little free time because of family pressures, devote much of that time to quilting? This apparent incongruity is resolved when one looks at the value of quilting as a means of self-expression. When I asked a grandmother why she spent so much time quilting, she thought a moment and then answered softly, "I quilt for a contented heart." Although quilting is a form of self-expression, it is not contrary to the Holdeman value system; indeed, their entire life reflects their religion. One afternoon, at a quilting bee at the church, another woman reflected, "Making a quilt is like livin' a good Christian life . . . The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut them out to suit ourselves. And that's free will."

### **Discussions and implications**

Constraints on Holdeman Mennonite women seem overwhelming. Yet, these women were raised to suppress individual needs and to yield to group control. The community requires them to repress individuality and to submit to rigid measures of control. Women's bodies are a major source of conflict, and the site of struggles between the patriarchal social system and women's agency. In these struggles, not only clothing per se is negotiated. Dress is the site of conflict where symbolic meanings are negotiated and contested. Dress is a metaphor; it is interpreted as a visual symbol of the suppression of the self to the demands of the community. Women's bodies become the focus of a symbolic struggle over both personal and group identities – a struggle reflecting how freedom and constraint go hand in hand.

Although constraint of women and their dress dominates gendered discourse between Holdeman men and women, we also see freedom in their material culture. Women not only overlook some deviations from normative behavior, they actively find ways to circumvent the dress code; thus they both

reinforce and resist normative constraints. In addition, women use quilting as a means of self-expression. This art form is only minimally controlled, probably because it is a long-standing tradition in the Holdeman community. Skirting the dress code and quilting empower and build solidarity among the women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Formally known as the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, this group is usually referred to as the Holdeman Mennonites. This name derives from their founder, John Holdeman, who broke off from the Old Mennonite Church in 1859. One of his major concerns was that the Mennonites were no longer keeping separate from the world; thus he re-instituted symbolic boundary maintenance devices such as a dress code. The church's formal name was rarely used; rather the designation was typically 'Holdeman Mennonites.' Informally, members usually refer to themselves as Holdemans. They also refer to themselves in a more general sense as Mennonites. I have followed the Holdemans' colloquial use of these terms. To provide anonymity, names of people and places are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Linda B. Arthur, "Clothing, Control and Women's Agency: The Mitigation of Patriarchal Power," in Sue Fisher and Kathy Davis, eds., *Negotiating at the Margins: The gendered discourses of power and resistance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press, 1993), 66-84; Linda B. Arthur, "Dress, Deviance and the Social Control of Women's Bodies," *NWSA Journal* 10,2, (1998): 75-99; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Sandy Niessen and Anne Brydon, *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Clarence Hiebert, *The Holdeman People* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973); Linda B. Arthur, "Clothing is a Window to the Soul: Social Control in a Holdeman Mennonite Community," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 15 (1997): 11-30.

<sup>6</sup> Melvin Gingerich, "Change and Uniformity in Mennonite Attire," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 40:4 (1966): 243-59.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Scott, *Why Do They Dress That Way?* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> The Holdeman community studied is one of many congregations nationwide, and is much like the other groups in the United States, except for being considered wealthier than many other congregations.

<sup>9</sup> For further information on this group, see other work cited above.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Boynton, *The Plain People: An Ethnography of the Holdeman Mennonites* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Due to shunning, life is very difficult for those who have been expelled. Relations between the expelled, their relatives, and the community at large are strained. Many continue to live in

the community following their expulsion, since they generally own farms that are hard to sell, and have few other economic options due to limited education. Church members closely monitor interactions between the expelled and their family members, who hope the expelled will recant their sins and rejoin the church. Many do return to the congregation. See Boynton, *The Plain People*.

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough discussion of the Holdeman dress code, see Arthur, "Clothing is a Window to the Soul."

<sup>13</sup> Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*; Arthur, "Clothing, Control and Women's Agency"; "Dress, Deviance and the Social Control of Women's Bodies"; "Clothing is a Window to the Soul"; Boynton, "The Plain People."

<sup>16</sup> R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Klassen, "Speaking Out in God's Name," in *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye, eds., (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 245.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Turner, *Body and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough discussion of religiosity and status, see Soloman Poll, *The Hasidic Community in Williamsburg* (NY: Glance Free Press, 1962).

<sup>21</sup> See Arthur, "Deviance, Agency and the Social Control of Women's Bodies."

<sup>22</sup> Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land*.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Shantz, "Frances Mateychuck's Quilts: Mapping a Place," in *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye, eds., (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 173-187.

<sup>24</sup> Johnathan Holstein, "The Amish and their Quilts," in *Needlework Designs and Amish Quilts*, L. Gilberg and B. Buckholtz, eds. (1977), 14.

<sup>25</sup> Rachel and Kenneth Pellman, *A Treasury of Mennonite Quilts* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Judy Schroeder Tomlonson, *Mennonite Quilts and Pieces* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> As a left-hander, I was not surprised that my entrance to the quilting bee was noted, as left-handedness is sometimes a problem. However, as it turned out all eyes were on me when I first sat down to a quilting frame because I was an outsider, not a lefty! My needlework ability proved to be an 'acid test.' Had I not been able to quilt I probably would not have been as welcome in the community.

# **“Is That the Time Already?”**

## **Reflections on Millennial Fatigue Syndrome**

*Ivan Emke*

One of the qualities I inherited from my mother is the ability to worry about the unknown. Anyone late arriving was bound to be stuck in a ditch somewhere. A child's stomach ache was a possible sign of the onset of appendicitis. A jar of peaches that didn't open with a comforting pop was probably spoiled (though that did not stop us from eating it). This makes me a prime candidate to be out there freeze-drying some food for the new millennium. But I'm not, and that's what scares me. In the flurry of discourse on the new millennium and “the Y2K problem” I remain quite nonplussed. But maybe I'm missing something here. Am I so jaded that I cannot even stir up a bit of concern over the impending end of “time as we know it?” Or, is it just that after a few years of millennial tedium, I am simply fatigued by the whole topic? I would diagnose the latter.

There are some reasons why I'm not excited about the coming millennium, and this essay is devoted to sharing them with you. Earlier this year, I was invited to ruminate on this event and how I would approach it from the various splinters of my own identity, as an academic, a researcher, a Mennonite (albeit geographically-challenged) and a writer of sometimes-humorous items. I was honored to do so, but let me be honest up front (as if I won't be as the essay proceeds.) I'm not sure what I have to offer that well-read and thoughtful people have not yet stumbled across. Nevertheless, I am an academic, trained to think and write on command, and to speak in 50-minute utterances. This is my utterance on the millennium.

The more I thought about the millennium, the more convinced I became that it is a fine metaphor for “meaning” in our times. The coming of the new millennium is ever-present in social discourse, which indicates that it is largely irrelevant in “real” terms. If the new millennium really “mattered” in that it

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*Ivan Emke teaches in the Social/Cultural Studies Program at Sir Wilfred Grenfeld College, Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland.*

would actually usher in some new way of living, then it would be too daring to interest *Time* and *USA Today*.

### **“When’s the Party?” Synchronizing our watches**

One of my primary complaints is that we’ve got the dates wrong. When the current Western calendar was devised, we messed up a bit. We were out by four years or so, give or take a few weeks. This means that Jesus was born in about 4 BC, or four years “before Christ.” To those who believe in miracles, it is no surprise that he could be born years before he was born. When we moved to our present calendar, we were out a week and a half, due to a misunderstanding between the sun and seasons and our calculations of them. This resulted in lots of creative tinkering, such as having to eliminate ten days from history to become aligned with the new calendar. Such a feat would be a tough thing to pull off in these days of direct debit financing (would banks honor the change, or dip out their mortgage payments as if the ten days actually existed?).

More important, these chronological inconsistencies mean that the millennium turnaround has come and gone, and we kind of missed it. If our calendar was supposed to mark the years since the birth of Christ and we got that one wrong, then a thousand years after the birth of Jesus was about 996 and two thousand years after was 1996. Can you remember 1996? What were the high points? Did it *seem* like an earth-shattering turning point for you? Was it the beginning of an anti-Christ-led “world government”? I don’t remember much about the year myself. We had a child (which may be why I don’t remember much), I went to work most days, poured the same ideas into the same semi-willing receptacles in my labor, and so on. But if we were to accept the premise (made by free-ranging after-dinner speakers of both the theological and secular persuasions) that there is something powerful about the change from one millennium to the next, then 1996 should have been a crackerjack time.<sup>1</sup>

I am playing dumb here, I admit. As one who has studied and now teaches Anthropology and Sociology, I realize that the “magical” qualities that we associate with time are socially-constructed. Thus, it is irrelevant whether our calendars are off – as long as we *think* that a new millennium is coming, then we will act *as if* that were the case. Therein, though, lies my problem and

one of the sources of my millennial fatigue. Not only is the Emperor naked, but he doesn't even exist.

I also know of the “magic” of numbers. We seem to believe that quantification hints at reality – if you can put a number to something, then it must be real. “On a scale of 5 to 10,” we might say to our kids, “how would you rate the pain in your stomach?” On hearing anything above a 5, we get out the tummy drugs. I know the seduction of statistics – of taking complex human phenomena and translating them into machine-readable data. The numbers come to “mean” something on their own – they have a power; anthropologists might say that numbers are a fetish in our culture. This worship of numbers spills over into our observations regarding dates. Thus, the number 2000 implies something grand, as opposed to a bland number like 1914 or 1939 – what could ever happen in a year with such a non-descript number? Come to think of it, what happened in 1900? Anything earth-shattering? How about 1800? 1700? 1600? Despite marking the turns of centuries and being fine numbers in themselves, these years turned out to be royal disappointments to the numerologists.

### **So what's the occasion?**

Maybe we all like to think that we live in interesting and pivotal times. This desire to be on the cusp of history fits well with a new millennium, prompting futurists to shiver with delight. There is a feeling in our culture that these are, indeed, special times. We're confronted by the dizzying speed of reading the dizzying amount of material on the dizzying rate of change. We're so dizzy we can't even think anymore. We save that for a few isolated people in old-fashioned disciplines. A philosophy teacher observed the other day, “You know, I can't teach philosophy in only three months; it takes at least six months to really teach anything of importance.” It struck me that such a statement was out of sync with our times, when students pick up allegedly-marketable skills in tidy packages of 10 to 13 weeks (plus the final exam).

Yeah, sure, things are changing. But not as profoundly as they changed in my parents' day or my grandparents' time. The shift from horse-propelled travel to automobile and then air travel was a big one. The move from face-to-face and written communication to the telephone and radio was a big one. They make the changes in my own lifetime look like distant cousins. I went

from talking on the telephone to sending e-mail messages. This is not a major jump. People fawn all over the Internet, saying things like “Oooh, I can send a message to my friend in Arizona and he can read it almost immediately!” Have they forgotten about the telephone, which does one better and lets you talk in real time? I’ve seen the change from driving in cars at about 80 kilometers per hour on two-lane roads to driving in cars at about 95 or 100 kph on four-lane roads. This is so small a change it hardly bears repeating. The changes that really made a fundamental difference in the daily lived experience of the majority of our nation had already taken place before I came along (or before those blessed baby boomers who paved my way, and now want me to pay for the road). Yet, we keep thinking we’re the ones who are trying to keep up with the world.

This is not to suggest that innovation isn’t still occurring. They aren’t about to close the patent offices yet (although there was allegedly some loose talk about that in the late 1800s). It is significant that marketers who study us endlessly are returning to traditional selling themes – to the ideas of stability, big cars, cigars, and happy little families on a side street. Maybe things haven’t changed so much after all.

### **Y2K 4U2: Everyone’s post-millennial postal code?**

The actual move from one millennium to the next, that one millisecond of time, would be quite irrelevant were it not for the threat of time-synchronized computers all over the world going silly. Our popular name for this is “Y2K.” When I hear the term, I keep thinking of a postal code. “Where *is* Y2K,” I wonder. In some unserved area of the Yukon somewhere, I suppose (since Canada Post’s system doesn’t even get to Y2A, let alone Y2K). Maybe we should all flock there on the appointed date? Maybe this is some kind of coded message that a higher intelligence has been sending us? Maybe I’ve watched a few too many “X-Files” episodes! Y2K is far more than a truncated postal code; it is the grand computer mistake. In the past, the myth goes, programmers felt space was at such a premium that they shortened our date from four digits to just the last two. This worked for a while, but then we inched ever closer to another century.

However, it has been some time since space in programming was at a premium. Now there is so much surplus memory that we encounter

phenomena called “cargo cults” – when upgrading a piece of computer software, a programmer may leave in bits of old programs that are no longer necessary instead of taking the time to delete them. Since space is not a problem, it is easier to simply disable the old material and leave it there than to actively clean it up and delete the files. So the myth about limited space is not convincing for most software. Why, then, did programmers continue to forget to make their work viable on the long term? For one thing, it shows the stunning lack of foresight among people who are supposed to be guiding us into the future. As someone pointed out, the computer industry still has not learned the lesson – after all, they shortened the “Year 2000 Problem” to “Y2K”!

At the height of Y2K fanaticism, a couple of years ago, people were arguing that our whole world would grind to a halt – our watches would stop, our microwaves would refuse to cook, our CD players would play everything sideways, and our cars wouldn’t start. I could never quite grasp the reason for this, but then I’m no computer programmer. What does it matter to a microwave, for example, what year it is? A couple of minutes after midnight, in search of some popcorn, would we try to start our microwave and it would think, “Uh, hey, it’s January 1st, 1900 – microwaves aren’t invented yet so I’d better stop working!” Unless I’m very much mistaken, machines don’t really care what the date is – including computers. My antique computer at home that still does most of what I want a computer to do (this says a lot about my level of computer intelligence) has had trouble with the date for a long time now. Currently, it tells me that it is “November 12, 1993.” Jeepers, it doesn’t even *spell* the blasted month correctly, let alone have any idea that it is actually October 3, 1999 (when I wrote this). But other than being in a time warp, this computer works fine. Furthermore, it is of some great solace to me that it has the date wrong – at least it gives me the illusion, every time I turn it on, that **I** am the “master” and **it** is the tool.

This whole Y2K thing shows that McLuhan and the Amish were right about technology. McLuhan said something to the effect that “we shape our own tools, and then they shape us.” And the Amish understand that technology is never benign, but needs to be chosen with an eye to how it might affect what we value. This is one of the ironies, then, of our time. The more we rely on



technology, the less control we have. Those who can face tomorrow without fear are those who are behind the times.

The one piece of hope that is emerging is that people are beginning to show signs of Y2K fatigue and Y2K cynicism and even Y2K dismissal. It comes from being tired of talking heads on our TVs who sound like a bunch of doomsday cultists, except that they are up front about charging a hefty fee for their chat. The meaning of Y2K is changing, as can be seen in its use as an advertising ploy. “Y2K” now accompanies advertisements for items as disparate as car leases, bug killers, and flashlights. A hardware chain store includes a “Y2K” page in its advertising flyers. A semiotician would be interested in how this company “defines” Y2K for its customers, how it encodes this moment, by advertising our coming need for styrofoam plates, plastic cutlery, duct tape, and lanterns. (When the millennium comes and the power is out, why will we be forced to eat with disposable cutlery?) “Always be prepared,” the ad lectures, although how a package of elastic tie-down straps will help me survive is curious. (Will there be lots of wind as our computers sit lifeless and quiet?) By the time advertisers pick up and use a cultural item, it is often already quite benign. Or, in the act of using it in advertising, the item is emptied of social and political content, and rendered safe. Advertising saves us again . . .

### **The millennium as doomsday**

Attempts to predict the future are often cloaked attempts to control it – to prescribe a direction for it, preferably one that privileges the prophet’s ideas. It is unfortunate that some will use fears of the future as a tool to gain power. One of the links I cannot seem to understand in millennium-speak is the argument that the breakdown in computers will lead to some kind of massive centralization and the emergence of an “anti-Christ” or world government to control the chaos. I think that if computers all self-destruct in January, we’ll be much further from “world government,” whatever that is, than we are right now. For such a major centralization project, you’d have to have computers and electronic linkages and so on. If you’re planning to give everyone the sign of the Beast, you don’t want their identity numbers scribbled on bits of paper here and there! Besides, world government is already here. We just call it “Coke” or “Nike” or a variety of other names that I’m probably not allowed

to use without fear of punitive lawsuits. Frankly, the chaos and challenges to our existence as a world are all around us – we don't have to wait for next year. A world where the 500 richest people control more wealth than the three billion poorest people is one that already seems to be running out of control.

### **What does this all mean to your average Newfoundland Mennonite?**

A curious question, I suppose, and I'm one of about a dozen or so who might try to answer it. Here in Canada's far east the millennium will arrive at least a half hour earlier than elsewhere in the country. If you're really concerned, give me your phone number and I'll call you after midnight (our time) to reassure you that everything will be all right.

Now that I mention it, maybe this could be an entrepreneurial scheme. I'll set up a big computer phone bank, and for a respectable but competitive fee my computer will call you after midnight my time, and reassure you in a steady, computer-generated voice: "Hi. I'm calling from Newfoundland, where the new millennium has already begun. I'm OK, and still working, so relax. Take it easy. Don't bother with that last trip to the convenience store for more powdered milk. Put the plastic cutlery and elastic tie-down straps away. Have a nice day." Of course, if you arranged the service and then the computer *doesn't* call, then you can get truly worried.

As for the impact of the millennium on Mennonites, it reminds me of the joke we used to tell on the banquet circuit early in this decade. We'd say, "The Mennonite church is engaging in a major change in focus. The mission of the church used to be how to be relevant and prophetic in the late 1980s, but now it has shifted dramatically to how to be relevant and prophetic in the early 1990s!" I really don't think that the millennium will, or should, change Mennonitism. There may be some alterations. Maybe this will be the millennium when the "Conference of Eastern Canada" actually starts to get congregations located in eastern Canada?

The big push for Mennonites, however, will be saved for the Anabaptist Half-Millennium, to be celebrated in around 2025, depending on how you mark it. Get ready for the themes now, the logo, the felt banners – "Half a Millennium of Anabaptist Faithfulness," "The Anabaptist Path: Fairway, Concession, or Sideroad?" or "Anabaptism: No Longer a Cult."

**In the end . . .**

I don't worry about surviving the shift to the new millennium. I worry about surviving the endless round of "Best of the Century" lists that our media will assail us with. Proving, once again, that if you let market forces determine your media system they will seek the lowest common denominator. What's the point of a list of the "100 Best Movies of the 20th Century" when most of them are unavailable? Or the "10 Craziest Toy Fads of the Century" or the "25 Most Interesting People of Our Time." Do we really need to be reminded of the antics of people like Henry Kissinger and Mikhail Gorbachev? These are feeble attempts at giving us a sense of our own cultural past, recycling nostalgia as history.

I actually look forward to the new millennium, despite my rather off-hand dismissal of it throughout this essay. Not because I expect the end of this world and the beginning of some new age, but because all of the tedium and silliness of the pre-millennial tension we've been surrounded by will finally be over. It may take a year or two to wane entirely, but we're bound to be left with a sense of relief and renewed vigor. Then perhaps we can think again about solving some of those old problems that have been around for the last few hundred years.

Where will *you* be spending New Year's Eve? Will you be counting down to the end of something, or to the beginning of something? Or will you simply get on the bandwagon and spend the last moments of this century (and millennium) hanging around a cash machine to see what happens to it at midnight? I'd hope not.

Happy New Year, folks.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Note that I am not even engaging in the popular lunchroom argument about when the third millennium allegedly *starts* – 1 January 2000, or 2001. I realize that, according to the rules, it is 1 January 2001. However, the big change for most of us will come a year before, when we try to train ourselves to stop writing 1999, but to write 2000, on our cheques.

## Faith and Reason

*Gregory Baum*

“Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible nature and eternal power, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (*Romans 1:20*)

This famous verse from Paul’s Letter to the Romans has been interpreted in two antithetical ways. Some readers have argued that Paul here recognizes that people, thanks to the gift of reason they have received, are able to recognize that there is a God. Even outside of Israel, the nations knew this long before the gospel was preached to them. They recognized that the world had not made itself; they reasoned, therefore, that it must have been made by an intelligent, transcendent power. Reason is understood here as a friend of faith. Intelligence helps people to become believers.

Other readers of Romans 1:20 have interpreted this passage quite differently. They read it in the light of the following verse, Romans 1:21, which says, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him; they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. So they are without excuse.” According to these readers, the Apostle here claims that, abstractly speaking, human reason could come to the knowledge of God, but that, concretely speaking, the exercise of reason has been distorted by the sin, the inherited sin, that marks the whole of human existence. Here reason is understood as ‘the wisdom of the flesh’ that leads people away from God. Intelligence is not a friend of faith but its competitor or even its enemy.

Both these apparently antithetical interpretations may possibly be correct: reason may be both a friend and an enemy of faith. This sounds

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*Gregory Baum was a professor of theology at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto for 28 years. Presently he is professor emeritus of religious studies at McGill University in Montreal. This essay is Baum’s address to the 1999 convocation of the Masters of Theological Studies program, Conrad Grebel College.*

paradoxical, but paradoxical discourse is often an appropriate way of communicating religious truth.

Does this debate about reason and faith concern us as theologians in the present age? Does it deal with questions raised in today's world? When secular people look at the Solar Temple, the suicide cult that made the news a few years ago, they find this cult totally irrational. They say these believers must have been crazy. And what do these secular people see when they look at the Christian church? What if they say that Christian believers are also irrational? Why might they say this? Because Christians trust in something called God that may not exist at all. What should we reply to such secular people? Should we say, No, no, we are not like the Solar Temple: our faith is not irrational? Or should we say instead, Yes, you are quite right, our faith cannot be defended by rational arguments?

Let me pose these questions in a broader way. Should Christians engage in dialogue with non-believers in a rational search for common values and cooperation? Or must Christians mistrust the intelligence of non-believers because they still sit in darkness waiting for the light? Should we cooperate with the world on the basis of a common intelligence? Or should we remain aloof from the world, blinded as it is by its sin? These are important theological questions. They have been answered by Christians in different ways, depending – in part at least – on their historical situation.

How did St. Paul deal with this issue on his visit to Athens? In Acts 17:16-32 we find Paul standing on the Areopagus, the forum, in conversation with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. They say to him, "You bring some strange things to our ears: we wish to know what these things mean." The cult of a God who resurrected the man Jesus seemed irrational to them. This is how Paul replied to them: Religious people and many philosophers of your own culture acknowledge the existence of divinity. They know that the deity exists, but they are ignorant of what this God is like. Christians believe that this incomprehensible Godhead has revealed itself in amazing events that culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. According to Acts some of the philosophers mocked Paul's explanation, while others said, "We will hear you again about this."

Speaking in Athens, the Apostle argues that reason, at least in the Greek philosophical tradition, is capable of acknowledging the realm of the spirit

sustained by divinity. In his conversation with the Athenian philosophers, Paul does not identify human reason with the ‘wisdom of the flesh’ that leads us astray and keeps us away from God. Reason, Paul here suggests, is a help to belief. Intelligence is a stepping stone or a ladder leading up to faith.

Many early Christian theologians were greatly impressed by the Greek philosophical tradition. Why? Because its great thinkers offered rational arguments for the existence of divinity, for the unity of humankind, for the spiritual nature of the human person, and for the imperative for a virtuous life. The theologians of antiquity praised reason as a friend of faith. For them, ‘Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth’ – this is in fact a quotation from Pope John Paul II’s recent circular letter on Faith and Reason.

At the same time, the same theologians of antiquity denounced the practice of the ancient pagan civilization, its idolatry, its oppressive structures, its love of pomp and pleasure, its pride and sense of superiority. These ancient theologians held that this unholy practice, guided by a distorted rationality, stood under God’s judgment. At the end of the fourth century, St. Augustine even foresaw the collapse of the Roman Empire and its civilization.

We notice here a curious paradox reminding us of St. Paul’s double message. On the one hand, the dominant public culture of antiquity is seen as shot through with error and evil, but on the other hand, a minority current within this civilization is regarded as the bearer of great wisdom. Reason associated with the dominant culture is distorted and leads people astray, while a deeper form of reason, mediated by a minority trend, is a guide to wisdom and a stepping stone to faith. Because a culture has many levels, it can, at one and the same time, mediate to the public at large both the ‘wisdom of the flesh’ that leads to perdition and the ‘wisdom of the spirit’ that leads to the true and the good.

Let me now turn to our own civilization. One obvious way in which modern thought differs from the philosophy of antiquity and the middle ages is the loss of metaphysical confidence. In modern times, reason has increasingly focused on the empirical world and assumed its incompetence in matters spiritual. Modern thinkers often distinguish between science, which provides certain knowledge, and philosophical thought, which offers only opinions. Modern

thought here deviates from the classical tradition which, as we just saw, provided certain knowledge of the existence of a spiritual world.

The concentration of modern thinkers on the material world has also affected their understanding of ethics. Many philosophers, especially in the British tradition, regard human beings as oriented by nature toward the struggle for survival and the enhancement of their material conditions. This view differs radically from the thought of the classical Greek philosophers for whom humans were, by their very nature, oriented towards the true and the good. For the modern thinkers, people are essentially self-seeking, and to be ethical, under these circumstances, means to seek one's advantage in the most rational manner. This is called enlightened self-interest. Instead of aiming at short-range benefits, the enlightened person opts for what is of advantage to him or her in the long run. This utilitarian ethics is, in fact, the dominant moral philosophy of modern society. It goes hand in hand with the modern practice of the self-promotion of individuals and hence with the competition of all with all. The image or symbol of human living is here no longer the pacified community but the competitive market.

The purpose of offering this analysis is to shed light on the suspicion of reason entertained by the original Lutherans and Mennonites in the sixteenth century. They had a keen sense of the direction taken by the emerging modernity: self-centeredness and self-promotion. This modern project was guided by a rationality that did not deserve to be respected. Since modern reason blessed individualism and materialism, it could not be trusted, even if it claimed to demonstrate the existence of God. Luther put it rather crudely: reason, he said, acted like a whore: it went to bed with any man who paid well.

Yet the paradoxical situation we found in the writings of Paul and in Christian antiquity may also be true of modern civilization. The dominant culture and in it, the dominant form of reason, is indeed blind to the spiritual world. Modern techno-scientific rationality is not open to God. The type of reasoning that rules the world militates against Christian faith. Mennonites and Protestants were quite right when they were suspicious of this reason. Yet at the same time – and this is the paradox – there also exists in modern civilization a deeper cultural current, a minority tradition, sustained by religious thinkers and philosophers who have a wider understanding of reason and offer rational arguments for the existence of a spiritual world. For them

intelligence is a friend of faith. Here reason serves as a stepping stone or ladder leading up to faith in God's Word.

Let me say a few words about modern thinkers who think that intelligence supports Christian faith. They represent a minority trend. Typical of most of them is that they focus on people's inner experiences. They have sympathy for St. Augustine's advice: "Do not wander far and wide but return into yourself. Deep within the human heart, there dwells the truth." The modern thinkers of whom I speak recognize that despite the awful things people do to one another, many retain a moral conscience, a commitment to love and solidarity, and a yearning for a just and peaceful world. They carry a utopia within their hearts. Some modern thinkers marvel at this. What, they ask, is the origin of this moral experience? How is it that in a world dominated by the lust for power and wealth, people arrive at such profound ethical convictions, convictions that are more real to them than the knowledge derived from science? This can only be explained if, in their conscience, people hear a spiritual call, a transcendent summons, a divine imperative. Rational reflection on this ethical experience assures these modern thinkers of the reality of a spiritual realm. Reason applied to ethical experience opens the door to metaphysics. Intelligence is here a friend of faith.

I wish to give one example of a twentieth-century secular thinker, the German philosopher Max Horkheimer, who shared this intense ethical conviction and who almost came to believe in God. Philosophers of antiquity and the middle ages thought that human wisdom began with astonishment over the beauty and wonders of the universe. They marvelled at the harmony of the spheres. By contrast, Horkheimer was incapable of marvelling at the world. All his life he was deeply troubled by the injustices in the world, the suffering inflicted upon innocent people, and the death-dealing maldistribution of wealth and power in the global society. His entire philosophical work dealt with the irrationality of the world. He did not marvel at the universe, but sorrowed over the human situation in which the strong are victorious over the weak. For him, the beginning of thought was not wonder but outrage. He lamented that modern scientific reason was intelligence disconnected from love. By bracketing the ethical dimension, he argued, modern reason exercises a dehumanizing impact on society. Horkheimer was not a religious man. Yet when he grew older, he began to marvel – not at the



world – but at the power of his ethical conviction, the utopia that haunted him and so many other people, educated and uneducated. Horkheimer was astonished that sunk into his own being was a desire for the true and the good. The book in which he offers his reflections on this moral experience is entitled *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen* (The Yearning for the Totally Other). Horkheimer did not become a believer. He remained at the threshold. But he argued that intelligence grounded in love is open to the possibility of God.

Some modern thinkers go further. They argue that the impossibility of being reconciled to an unjust society and the suffering of the innocent is an experiential sign and expression of divine transcendence. Here reason is a friend of faith. Reason, as St. Paul so clearly saw, has many faces. While the dominant reason of his society was inimical to divine revelation, at another level, the reason of the wise – a minority trend – affirmed the existence of divinity.