



The Conrad Grebel Review

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Editorial

The cover photograph for this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, presenting no obvious and immediate signification, begs some explanation. At first glance, it is a study in 1960s Mennonite headgear – the men fashionable in their bowlers and fedoras, the women modest in their kerchiefs. But there is another “gender-political irony” here, referred to by Jeff Gundy in his article on depression and Mennonites. The setting is a 1960 relief sale in Illinois and there is tragic-comic irony in the fact that the women behind the chain-link fence are undoubtedly the makers of the quilts in the foreground, not the proprietary men in front. The picture noted by Gundy (p.14) is slightly different (we couldn’t secure the exact photo), but his grandmother Ella Ringenberg, second from the left, is in both. Her life, and death, is one of the “scatter plots” around which Gundy’s essay is organized. His thoughtful and hopeful reflection begins what one hopes is an increased discussion of the prevalence of depression in individuals and families as well as the possible intersections between melancholia and particular ethno-religious traditions.

The other articles in this issue address questions about Anabaptism/Mennonitism mainly from philosophical and theological perspectives. Daniel Liechty, writing from a background in theology and clinical social work, explores the meanings of postmodernism for Anabaptism by tracing the evolution of communications technology from the ancient through to the postmodern world. He proposes that in the move from a reading-based modern consciousness to the currently developing one oriented towards visual images, Anabaptist adherents must caution against a fixation on the written word, which Liechty describes as “a spiritual unity held firm by doctrinal conformity.” Instead, he proposes that the “speech-action” modelled by 16th century Anabaptists will be the best communicative tool to express ethical concerns based on the gospel message of love.

Next, Paul Doerksen critiques theologian John Milbank’s notion of ontological peace and raises questions about its relevance to Anabaptist thought. Earl Zimmerman examines Menno Simons’s model of a “pure” church in a “corrupted” world and reflects on the relevance of that 16th ecclesiological model for Mennonite churches today.

Eric Friesen's voice is familiar to many listeners of classical music radio in both the United States and Canada. For many years a broadcaster on Minnesota Public Radio, Friesen is currently heard throughout the week on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio Two network, as host of several classical music programs. We're delighted to present his words in print, as he reflects on his affinity for both classical and gospel music.

Winnipeg writer Sarah Klassen contributes a short story, introduced by literary refractions editor, Hildi Froese Tiessen. An assortment of book reviews rounds out this issue.

Marlene Epp, *Editor*

Cover photo: Mennonite Relief Sale, 1960, Morton, Illinois. Courtesy of the Mennonite Central Committee photograph collection. Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.

Scatter Plots: Depression, Silence, and Mennonite Margins

Jeff Gundy

“It is a serious matter to bring someone back from the dead.”

-T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*¹

Statisticians talk about “scatter plots,” a series of points on a graph that when carefully plotted and analyzed can be made to yield all sorts of useful information on the correlation between two variables. They have elaborate and rigorous ways of calculating such correlations, and a considerable vocabulary for discussing them.

On the interlocking subjects of depression and silence and Mennonites, there are many more than two variables, and I have no hope of achieving the kind of rigor that statisticians pursue. After a summer of research I have plenty of data, enough for hundreds of “points,” but those points resist being plotted onto a neat graph or yielding a set of clear statistically significant results. When dealing with the knottiest and most troubling human realities, simple conclusions are elusive. But we can hardly abandon those difficult realities, or the people that find themselves within them, merely because of their difficulty. So my effort here is to place some plots, some points, some information, some stories, before you, and hope to weave them all together in a way that might lead toward greater understanding of how depression and silence and Mennonite traditions have intersected, resonated, and reverberated in human lives.

Jeff Gundy is professor of English at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio. This article was originally delivered as the C. Henry Smith Peace Lecture of 1999.

Points for a scatter plot***Point 1***

A voice, reading. Words from one of those Little Golden Books for kids you can still get in supermarkets. A low, strangely flattened, slightly hurried voice, as though she didn't quite trust the story but was resigned to reading it through, hoping it would not take too long. Why? What would be there when she finished? Children don't ask such questions, or if they do, they ask only in selfish terms: Read another one, Grandma? One more? Read this one again?

What was a child to know about her, there on the couch with the fuzzy, pinkish-brown raised loop upholstery, there in the living room of the small squarish brick house she and Grandpa had built in town. The boy was young, didn't remember much, didn't notice much. Why would he remember the note of sadness in her voice when for years he didn't understand it to be sadness?

Point 2

The boy is ten, on the floor in the upstairs room he shares with his younger brother, a tangle of small metal pieces around him. The Erector Set came to him from his father or his father's younger brothers, and it's old, but it has lots of parts and a heavy, clumsy electric motor with a complicated set of gears. He's already built the elevator and the merry-go-round, and now he's working on the Ferris wheel.

Footsteps on the stairs. It's his father, looking through the railing, with something to say. Grandma is gone. The boy doesn't flail around or cry out. They had gone to see her last night in the hospital, and his grandfather had died a while before. He knows he should be sad, and he is sad. He won't cry; he's learned on the playground and in the gym that only sissies cry. Though he never exactly decides not to, he will never finish the Ferris wheel.

Point 3

Henry Stalter, the boy's great-grandfather, was a curly-haired, vigorous man born in 1872. His only son died in 1915, and Henry decided in his early forties that he'd had enough of farming. He rented out his land, although he continued to live on the farmstead, keep a big garden, and raise chickens. In 1921 his

beloved wife Mary also died, and it was just the four girls and Henry. A grandchild remembers Henry saying, “Why farm and work hard when there’s no son to carry on the work?”

Point 4

Music. Perhaps the invocation that used to be sung every Sunday in the Waldo Mennonite Church: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.” The boy remembers that chorus well, and a feeling that comes along with it: a sort of yearning that he can’t quite identify, a desire for some kind of miraculous, transforming, otherly experience that he has no language for except the language of the church. What would it mean, to be melted, molded, filled, and used? To be taken out of his little self, away from the flat prairie and the farm and the small church and the small town?

Point 5

Numbers. At least 11 million people in the United States have an episode of depression each year, according to the Epidemiologic Catchment Area Survey. The total cost of the disorder has been estimated at \$44 billion. Twenty-eight percent of that is the direct cost of medical, psychiatric, and drug treatment; 17% is the result of the more than 18,000 associated suicides (at least half of all people who commit suicide are severely depressed); and 55% (\$24 billion) is due to absenteeism and lowered productivity among the 72% of depressed persons who are in the work force.²

Point 6

Definitions. What *are* we talking about? Professionals talk of two major types of depressive disorders, unipolar and bipolar. The unipolar disorders, which typically do not involve manic periods, include dysthymia (mild but persistent depression), adjustment disorder with depressed mood, and major depressive disorder. Bipolar disorders, which do include manic or hypomanic periods, are further divided into cyclothymia, bipolar I disorder, and bipolar II disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM IV)*, the standard text of the psychiatric community, offers much more detail.

Here is a section of the description of bipolar II disorder, for example:

The essential feature of Bipolar II Disorder is a clinical course that is characterized by the occurrence of one or more Major Depressive Episodes accompanied by at least one Hypomanic Episode. Hypomanic Episodes should not be confused with the several days of euthymia that may follow remission of a Major Depressive Episode. In addition, the episodes are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and are not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. . . .³

Even academics like me might find such language difficult to read, aloud or otherwise, without a good deal of pausing and knotting of brows. Yet like most professional discourse it *sounds* confident, rigorous, and definitive, and in the *DSM IV* it's further supported by long, detailed lists. There are exactly nine symptoms of major depression, and patients are to be diagnosed with it if they meet "four criteria that apply to a set of nine symptoms, five or more of which must be observable for the same two-week period."

One need not be a wild-eyed critic of the psychiatric enterprise to suspect that these attempts at classification are hardly airtight, that such language might prove difficult to correlate closely with actual human lives. Such critics are easy to find; one web site quotes L.J. Davis's description of the *DSM* as "the only catalogue in the world that makes money" and accuses it of being "about as scientific and reliable as reading tea-leaves."⁴ Popular books and films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Listening to Prozac*, and the work of critics like R.D. Laing and Seth Farber have cast doubt on our definitions of mental health and illness, and have argued that psychiatric "help" can be misguided and destructive even when well-intentioned. David Karp has recently critiqued the "medicalization" of mental illness and the use of disease models to address it.⁵

Even if we grant the overall good intentions of mental health practitioners, and the Mennonites among them in particular, it is a daunting task to make any scheme, no matter how carefully constructed, do justice to the innately subjective, individual, and often fiendishly complex welter of depressive disorders. I have heard plenty of horror stories, and just as many healing stories, about the mental health system. Providing genuine help to people with

mental illness, I have come to believe, is one of the most innately difficult challenges that we face.

Point 7

Treatment options: a tangle of drugs and therapies and more radical procedures. Lithium and Prozac, Wellbutrin and Buspar, Xanax and Zoloft and Effexor. St. John's Wort and banks of sun lamps. Biopsychological and psychodynamic and behavioral and cognitive-behavioral and interpersonal psychotherapeutic approaches. Hospitalization. Electroconvulsive shock therapy. Brain surgery.⁶ So many ways and means, all of them sometimes useful, all of them sometimes no good at all. Chekhov's words ring painfully true: "If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure."⁷

Point 8

Some things we do know. Though depression has no single origin and no single cure, though it exists in many forms and levels of severity, that it troubles and even destroys the lives of many good people is beyond question. While much about it remains obscure, collectively we have an enormous experience and a vast body of information on it. In fact we know a great deal, even if much of it is confusing and little is conclusive. My hope, then, is to use this space for some story-telling, discussion, and reflection on the subject of depression, and some particular Mennonite experiences of depression, but with no claim to being complete or definitive. I will offer some generalizations, but with a keen sense that what I know is still partial, tentative, and open to supplementation and correction.

Further plotting

No one who has battled a serious depressive episode, or walked along with someone who has, would question that depression is a real and sometimes devastating disorder. My nosing around suggests that few of us do not have, at the least, a good friend or relative who has struggled with major depression. Yet depression remains under-reported, often misdiagnosed, dismissed as mere gloominess or attitude, and treated casually or not at all. These days we may accept intellectually what we hear from mental health authorities – that severe

depression is largely a problem of brain chemistry, an organic illness no less than chicken pox or measles. But old fears and stereotypes are not easily dislodged. Isn't it very different to hear that an acquaintance or a relative has, say, diabetes, than to hear they are in a major depression? Indeed, we may never hear about the depression at all, or hear only a rumor. If we do learn of it, do we send a card? Hallmark has a huge selection but how many of them seem apropos? Do we make a visit to the psych ward? It's a less cheery place than obstetrics, maybe even scarier than Intensive Care. And when we next see the person, do we ask how they're doing, or assume that because they're out in public they must be "over it"?

When I started telling people I was writing about depression, the first question was usually whether I meant the time period or the other thing. The next reaction was almost always a kind of knowing nod, a recognition, and some kind of story about a relative, a friend, or a neighbor. One person said briskly, "Oh, they cure that with drugs these days" – but only one. Another told of a relative who would plant a huge garden every spring in her manic phase, then spend most of the rest of the year in bed. Another mentioned the phrase "Mennonite Melancholia." A pastor told me that depression is *the* most common problem she sees in her pastoral counseling work. Many had a feeling that their particular group – Mennonites, Irish, academics, farmers, students, whatever – is especially prone to depression, and offered theories about what made that so. The more I explored, however, the more I came to think that just about every group in modern America has its share, or more than its share, of melancholics, each with its own particular sense of why the gloomy tunnels of melancholy should be so familiar.

Some of the talk was guarded, as well it might be – was I just fishing for secrets that shouldn't be told? But much of it came with a sense of relief, an eagerness to let hidden things into the air. People told me about their relatives, their spouses, their parishioners, sometimes – always a little restrained, and rightly so – about themselves. Everyone had a story.⁸

Depression is probably as old as civilization and maybe older. The Greeks knew it well: the term "melancholy" goes back at least to Hippocrates, who attributed the worry and gloom associated with the condition to a surplus of "melankholia," or "black bile." As early as Aristotle another enduring theme emerges: that melancholy is curiously connected to certain types of

accomplishment. “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics, or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?” he asks in “Problematica.” The Hebrews knew their own black spells; we have only to read Job, or Ecclesiastes, or Psalms such as Ps. 22: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

It seems clear that David the poet-king knew what another poet, Nerval, would centuries later call “the black sun of melancholy.” Perhaps because so many poets and artists seem to encounter depression, there is no shortage of vivid, compelling, fascinating accounts of it.⁹ Many of the greatest poems have their deepest roots in melancholy, and so of course do the lesser ones. There are plentiful memoirs and first-person accounts, and even a sub-genre of academic or scholarly works by authors whose interest in the subject is more than professional. One of the earliest of these, Robert Burton’s voluminous *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), still makes for fascinating and worthwhile reading. It is an immense, baggy compendium of verse, quotation, ancient lore, opinion, hearsay, and the best scientific information available at the time. While the science sounds ludicrous today, much of the description still rings true. Here is Burton on the seductive attractions of melancholy:

[M]ost pleasant it is at first, to such as are melancholy given, to lie in bed whole days, and keep their chambers, to walk alone in some solitary Grove, betwixt Wood and Water, by a Brook side, to meditate upon some delightsome and pleasant subject A most incomparable delight it is so to melancholize, & build castles in the air, to go smiling to themselves, acting an infinite variety of parts until at last the scene is turned upon a sudden, by some bad object, and they, being now habituated to such vain meditations and solitary places, can endure no company, can ruminate of nothing but harsh and distasteful subjects. Fear, sorrow, suspicion, clownish timidity, discontent, cares, and weariness of life surprise them in a moment, and they can think of nothing else; continually suspecting, no sooner are their eyes open, but this infernal plague of Melancholy seizeth on them, and terrifies their souls . . .¹⁰

We need to make an important though difficult distinction here. A “melancholy” sense of the trials and burdens of existence – which indeed is hardly unrealistic and which, as Burton notes, has its charms as well as its terrors – is (I suspect) a feeling that most of us know. There is a poetic melancholy that I know well, a sadness that has scope and dimension and meaning, and out of it comes art that struggles with the deepest mysteries of love and loss and death. But this melancholy, while far from “happiness,” is fundamentally different from the pernicious, overwhelming, life-sapping depression that its victims speak of with the most earnest horror.

As an example of “poetic” melancholy, Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” is heart-wrenching:

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Aye, in the very temple of delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.¹¹

There is a real sadness here, surely – one driven by awareness of death and the fleeting nature of life. Yet there is a strange delight in the lines as well, in the savor of the language, in the way it bursts on the tongue like the grape of Joy. When Keats writes in “Ode to a Nightingale” that he “has been half in love with easeful death” – both poems were written while he was nursing his brother Tom, near death from tuberculosis – we sense that he is not about to fall all the way in love with death, that the poem is itself an act of resistance as well as recognition.

The difference between such melancholy and the darker, more pernicious state of the worst depression becomes clearer if we consider one of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “terrible sonnets”:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves, but worse.¹²

When I think of my great-grandpa Henry Stalter losing his son and his wife in his forties, renting out his land, retiring to his garden and his prize Buff Orpington hens, *I* get melancholic. But that's no proof that Henry himself underwent more than the normal human grief over his losses, much less that he was what we would call depressed. Farmers worked hard in those days and often retired early, though seldom quite as young as he did. And in his forty years of retirement, from what his children and grandchildren remember, he was not miserable or withdrawn. He had a twinkle in his eye and a lively interest in the world. You didn't want to interrupt him when the market reports came on the radio at noon, and he was not easily convinced of the merits of chemical fertilizer and indoor plumbing, but he always had a hug and some candy for the young ones.¹³ If he *was* depressed, he seems to have hidden it well – itself, of course, not an unprecedented thing for an American Mennonite man to do.

It is generally agreed that the tendency to depression does run in families, for reasons that are probably partly genetic and partly not.¹⁴ Henry Stalter's daughter Ella Kathryn was born on March 15, 1901 on the family farm just north of Meadows, where her grandfather Chris Stalter had broken the virgin

prairie after emigrating from the family estate in south Germany. She lived all her life within ten miles of that farm, playing a traditional, quiet, vigorous part in her church and community. She married Arthur Henry Ringenberg, who went to the Flanagan Mennonite Church just down the road, on Sept. 19, 1923 “at a pretty home wedding in the home of the bride’s father, Henry Stalter.”¹⁵ They had three children: Merna, Vernon, and finally Arlene, my mother, who has lived her adult life just three-fourths of a mile down the road from the farm where she was born.

Art and Ella had a modest life but a steady one. The land was good and the farm supported them well even through the Depression. Art’s father Chris came out to help with the garden and the farm work for many years, and besides the field crops (corn, soybeans, oats, and hay) and sheep, chickens, and cattle, they raised vegetables and kept a fair-sized orchard – apples, peaches, plums, apricots, pears, and cherries – with blackberries, raspberries, grapes, and strawberries to boot. They worked hard but so did everyone else they knew, at least those who prospered. There was time to make car trips to the west and to Florida, bringing back stories and souvenirs – a shell with a light inside, a plaster fawn. They were active in the Waldo Mennonite Church, where Art was a trustee and on various committees, but neither sought to be a public figure. In the mid-fifties they turned the farm over to their son Vernon and built a new brick house in Flanagan, five miles away. From all that I know, their years together were quiet and good ones, and that is how they should be remembered.

Yet I can’t quite let them rest there. One further story comes from a photograph included in Willard Smith’s *Mennonites in Illinois*. Among the illustrations is a full-page photo of six men in hats and coats or insulated overalls standing behind a table piled with quilts and comforters. The caption reads: “Illinois Mennonite Relief Sale Committee in 1960 at Congerville, Illinois, with (left to right): Ralph Vercler, John Roth, Charles Hoffman, Clarence Yordy, Kenneth Burkey, Homer Springer. Presumably the men themselves did not make the quilts.”¹⁶

I had looked at this photo several times, since Homer is my great-uncle – his wife Ada was Ella’s sister, and he took over Henry Stalter’s farm after their marriage. Homer seems to be wishing this were over so he could go back to setting up tables and moving chairs. In the background, unmentioned in the

caption, is a chain-link fence and behind it a row of scarved heads. Six women, looking in the general direction of the camera but clearly not part of the “official” shot – and one of them is Ella Ringenberg. I didn’t even notice those women until I was looking at the photo with my mother; she spotted her mother at once and seemed tickled to find her there. Ella is wearing a light-colored coat and a scarf knotted under her chin. She has glasses, and her graying hair shows above her forehead; in 1960 she would have been 59. She seems to be looking just over the cameraman’s left shoulder, although something in her stance and her still, somber face makes me think that she had seen the camera and knew she would be in the picture, if only in the background.

The gender-political ironies here don’t need much laboring. Almost certainly Ella Ringenberg and the rest of the women behind the fence, or others like them, had made the quilts – which are actually, at least the ones in the picture, mostly knotted comforters. I doubt that these women spent much time complaining to each other or anyone else about being relegated to the background once again. I suspect that they were mostly used to it and that many of them accepted such status as the natural order. But as I studied Ella’s face in this photo I found myself believing, or perhaps just wanting to believe, that she felt something at this moment – a little tug against the busy, ordered surface of her days, an intimation that in another world she might have lived another, perhaps larger life.

That year, 1960, was the year Ella’s husband Art died, in December; it was a cancer – stomach or pancreas – that came on fast. His obituary says he had been ill for three months, so in March they probably had no idea that anything was wrong. They had spent much of the winter in Florida, as they had since their retirement. He was 63.

Ella Ringenberg herself died three years later, not a happy woman. She grieved, as anyone would, for her husband, but she had more trouble emerging from her grief than some. It seems evident that she slipped into what we would call depression, though clinical precision is not possible now. The family knew that she was lonely and unhappy – her children all lived within a few miles, and they were in contact almost daily – and tried to help. My cousins and I often took turns staying overnight with Grandma during those years, visits that our parents presented to us not as duties but as a sort of puzzling treat, something we were supposed to enjoy, though I found them more different

than exciting. My grandmother was a quiet woman always, and my ten-year-old notions of fun didn't much overlap with hers. I remember her flat voice reading to me from Little Golden Books when I was quite young, and I remember lying awake at night in the north bedroom with my grandfather's nightshirt tangled awkwardly around my small legs, trying to sleep in that oddly bright and occasionally noisy space. There were no cars or lights in the country. But in the morning there was breakfast, and a quarter to put in my pocket as I went off to school.

Ella's pastor at the time, Jack Stalter, also knew of her troubles. He told me, "When your grandpa died, it was hard on your grandma. . . . I remember we encouraged her to go see this counselor at Mennonite Hospital. And she went once, and she wouldn't go back any more. And I can understand that. She wasn't of the nature for people to ask her a lot of questions and all that kind of stuff. She wouldn't enjoy that."¹⁷

I know exactly what Jack means about this kind of quiet, although I didn't quite realize how reticent my family can be until I married into one whose members habitually discuss the most intimate topics in extensive and sometimes obsessive detail. In John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* he reflects on a similar reserve in his family, especially between him and his brother Robby:

Neither of us had learned very much about sharing our feelings with family members. At home it had been assumed that each family member possessed deep, powerful feelings and that very little or nothing at all needed to be said about these feelings Privacy was a bridge between you and the rest of the family. But you had to learn to control the traffic.¹⁸

When I talked about this passage with a class, some students were baffled by it. But I felt a deep resonance with Wideman's words. They have little to do with love or its absence; he is concerned with what we say and don't say to each other, and especially with the detailed discussion of the emotional and psychological dimensions of our lives. In some ways I think Ella's family – my family – fits the stereotypes of the reserved, phlegmatic Swiss Mennonites almost too well. We tend to assume that because we do care for each other, we don't need to talk about it much, and that things are

generally all right as long as we can't find much to say about them. If things are not all right, we have little practice at the kind of discourse that we need.

I doubt it was just my family. Jack Stalter said of Henry, Ella, and Art that "they had a faith that you just didn't move. Those older people – they had a faith that carried them through. They had a world view and a patience with the way things are" On one hand, I trust Jack's judgment and admire the faith he describes. On the other, I can't help but think that their silence and patience sometimes masked distress they found no good way to reveal. They were not people trained in, or comfortable with, expressing themselves very fully or clearly, especially about their feelings. Their community with its long tradition of quiet, almost wordless faith, did not encourage questions or even much discussion of loss, grief, and doubt. Somehow I associate that faith with the low voice I remember, with the figure in the background of the Relief Sale photo. Would it have changed my grandmother's life to have grown up with more permission to speak loudly, to be angry, to claim her griefs?

Many believe that losses, especially of parents, and "incomplete mourning" are common sources of depression. It's tempting to suggest that the roots of Ella's struggle are here as well. As a teen she lost a brother and then, barely out of her teens, her mother. She had lived all her life in a culture where an undemonstrative, stoic demeanor was the norm. If she was expected to grieve only briefly and moderately for her mother, to accept the ways of God with little outward show and to return quickly to the daily rounds, who can say what went on in her heart? Who can say what lingered within her for years, perhaps shadowed even to her, to emerge when she was confronted with yet another early loss?

Mennonites have no corner on reticence, of course, and in the nearly forty years since Ella's illness some things have changed both in the church and in the wider culture. The increasingly educated and sophisticated Mennonite mainstream is more willing to seek and accept counseling and other aid, and under the direction of Mennonite Mental Health Services (MMHS) a number of mental health facilities have been established in communities across the United States with concentrations of Mennonites.¹⁹ The MMHS institutions have their roots in the World War II experience of conscientious objectors in state mental health facilities, and represent a significant effort toward more

humane and Christian care for those with mental illness who are close enough to use their services. Still, as Ella's story and many others demonstrate, such efforts can hardly be said to have solved the ongoing problem of depression and other mental illness among Mennonites or in the wider culture. Many Mennonites remain too far from the institutions, are too reluctant to seek treatment, or find that their conditions resist even the best available care.

Yearning, loss and silence

To begin to understand why depression remains such a persistent reality, we must explore at least briefly the most significant theories about depression and melancholy. In his ground-breaking essay "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud argues that those two states are closely related; the key difference he sees is the loss of self-esteem in melancholy. If the work of mourning is to withdraw libido from attachment to the loved one, to learn to live without him or her, then melancholy may also involve loss of a love-object, though sometimes an unconscious one. "In grief," Freud says, "the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholy it is the ego itself [which becomes poor and empty] . . ." ²⁰

And yet, Freud came to believe, the melancholic grappling with loss is more than an aberration to be avoided or cured; it may be a basic element of self-formation. In *The Ego and the Id* he suggests that the process by which "an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego . . . has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego." ²¹ In a recent essay on the psychological novel *Nightwood*, Victoria Smith extends this argument that melancholy may be useful, even necessary; she claims that "[m]elancholia is a tool that sculpts the ego in moving back and forth between the psyche and culture." ²² And Julia Kristeva, a leading contemporary psychoanalytic theorist who has also struggled personally with melancholy, writes with wrenching ambivalence of her experience of deep depression: "My pain is the hidden side of my philosophy, its mute sister. . . . Without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play." ²³

"Without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche." A strong claim, and one that may seem at odds with some of this essay and with the general run of both North American and Mennonite society. Surely, in our sometimes obsessive pursuit of happiness, many North Americans have sought to push melancholy as far away as possible. Just as surely, in our sometimes obsessive

pursuit of community and discipleship, Mennonites have often sought to dismiss melancholy as mere selfish indulgence, expecting that will and faith alone should allow us to overcome or simply ignore it.

Both my research and my experience suggest that there is no life without loss, and that Freud and Kristeva are right that some degree of melancholy as a means of confronting that reality may be more or less indispensable. If so, to deny or trivialize the reality of depression, to fail to generate ways of coping with our inescapable melancholy, and to confuse truly dangerous depression with its lesser relatives may all prove dangerous. The work is not easy or simple.

Depression is often characterized as a “woman’s disease”; some studies indicate that unipolar disorders are diagnosed roughly twice as often in women as in men.²⁴ However, as Terrence Real and others have argued, male depression may often be masked or hidden by other symptoms and behaviors, including alcohol and drug use. In addition, Real claims, “We tend not to recognize depression in men because the disorder itself is seen as unmanly. Depression carries, to many, a double stain – the stigma of mental illness and also the stigma of ‘feminine’ emotionality.”²⁵ Thus many men endure “covert depression” that is never recognized or identified as such.

The deep and complex relations between melancholy and religion have been probed in several recent books. Donald Capps’s *Men, Religion, and Melancholia: James, Otto, Jung, and Erikson* explores the personal lives of those four great students of the psychology of religion. Capps concludes that “something deeply psychological lies behind religious melancholy”:

[T]he psychological precursor to the adult’s religious experience of forsakenness is the experience of separation from one’s mother, because this is the moment when the child first experiences what it means to be a “dispirited soul,” to “feel bereft,” in one’s “heart.”²⁶

The sense of being “forsaken,” outside God’s love, is surely at the heart of religious melancholy, whatever its sources. Strong feelings of isolation and loss are almost universal in depression. On this subject Kristeva writes that “The depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an invocation might point out, but no word

could signify.”²⁷ When I read this passage I was immediately caught by the word “invocation” and taken back to the one I remember best from my youth: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. . . .” Within those words, surely, is a yearning for exactly the sort of direct union, or reunion, that Kristeva describes.

The church can create a space for the corporate expression of such yearning – but what if it remains subjectively only a yearning without satisfaction? If we learn that we should feel God’s presence powerfully, even constantly, but do not, then what? In Freda Zehr’s account of a conservative Mennonite childhood, her sense of guilt, unworthiness, and exclusion clearly is not associated with loss of a loved one, but with a heavy, clumsy authority that imposes its will largely through guilt and negative rules:

(No ball games, no radio, no associating with non Mennonites, plain clothes, cape dresses, black stockings, endless lists of rules – this is wrong, that is wrong, even my unbidden, unconscious thoughts were wrong.) . . . it left me severely depressed with obsessive and compulsive thoughts of fear and worthlessness. . . . I did not feel love, but rather I felt judgment and criticism from those in authority over my spiritual life. Hence I did not feel love for or from God. A heavy sense of guilt hung over me [. . .] no matter how many trips I made to the altar of those tent revivals in the “Big Valley” each summer. . . .²⁸

Others I have spoken with describe similar feelings of depression, self-doubt, and even self-loathing associated with rigid power structures and sermons heavy on guilt but short on redemption. If one origin of depression is in a sense of disconnection and loss, then it seems clear that another may be a sense of inadequacy imposed by a church that seems to demand perfection of its members and even of its children. In *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America*, Julius Rubin notes that an earnest quest for spiritual experience can yield to a melancholy sense of isolation. He cites a recent survey which found that “a religious life founded upon the immediacy of the indwelling spirit (spirituality or God’s presence in one’s heart) also produced problems of ‘dispirited souls’ and those who feel bereft of God in their hearts.”²⁹

Mennonite religious practice varies widely, and so does the level and type of authority exerted within congregations. Many pastors and church leaders

are keenly aware of the issues I have been tracing here, and deal as sensitively and constructively as they are able with mental health issues in their congregations. Some are well-meaning but lack the training or resources to meet the challenge of ministering to the depressed. I suspect that others would still argue that preserving the community or leading souls to salvation is more important than humanistic notions like “mental health” anyway. I make no blanket accusations here. But I believe we must recognize the damage, however unwitting, that our patterns of worship and discipline can inflict on vulnerable hearts and minds – and that many who are burdened with depression and other mental illnesses will and should seek help within their congregations. We must be prepared to provide such help.

There is no one origin of depression, religious or otherwise. Childhood trauma is often a factor, but not always, and as we have just seen, such trauma can come from loss of a loved one, especially a mother, but also from mistreatment and abuse by family members or other authority figures. The whirlpool of changes and pressures adolescence often brings can generate depression that is sometimes misread as merely “a stage.” In adults, job stress, family pressures, childbirth, and other life changes can all trigger depressive episodes, with or without strong underlying factors. The physical decline and loss of loved ones that come with aging may yield depression among the elderly. Similar complexity also holds regarding physical and biological factors. Brain chemistry typically changes in severe depression, but just why and how those changes happen – or even whether they are causes or effects – is still not fully understood. A careful search for understanding of causes may be crucial to individual cases of depression, but here I can only consider more generally how we talk (and don’t talk) about depression and other mental illnesses, and how we can help each other as much as possible.³⁰

Among all my confusions about this subject, I will say a few things assertively. First, we need ways of speaking of such inner states, in all their complexity and difficulty, that will be heard and recognized. The greatest danger of depression is that there is often no way out of it from the inside. Some kind of help is necessary, but the first step is to emerge somehow from the silence in which it seems impossible even to communicate the reality of one’s situation to another.

The theme of silence, and of the near-impossibility of adequately communicating the feel of the disease to those who have not experienced it, has turned up over and over in my research. Depression is often a profoundly alienating experience, inflicting a pain that even its most articulate victims struggle to describe accurately. Novelist William Styron, whose *Darkness Visible* is one of the most eloquent memoirs of depression, writes that “if the pain [of depression] were readily describable most of the countless sufferers from this ancient affliction would have been able to confidently depict . . . some of the actual dimensions of their torment, and perhaps elicit a comprehension that has been generally lacking.”³¹ Mennonite poet and editor Victor Jerrett Enns offers this effort: “From personal experience I believe depression (particularly unipolar, severe, clinical depression) silences my ability to imagine, to create, to communicate and to care. When people ask what it feels like to be clinically depressed, I often refer to how boring it is. There seems to be so little ‘content’ or ‘experience,’ even of the imagination, in a severe depression.”³²

The difficulty of describing the pain of depression may be intensified by traditional Mennonite reticence and by our general social reluctance to talk too much about our deepest feelings. Depression at its most pernicious involves most acutely the near-total loss of energy and hope – in change, in getting better, even in the possibility of meaningful communication. At such an extreme it has almost nothing to do with the creative, even energizing melancholy of which Kristeva speaks. If it persists for long, almost inevitably the sufferer begins to suspect that life itself is not worth living, and that ending it will at least mean the cessation of pain.

As many as one out of five cases of severe depression ends in suicide. The willingness to deliberately end one’s life is surely the most alien and alienating element of depression, the most difficult for those who have never been stricken by it to understand. The public reaction to the 1987 suicide of author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi drew a strong response from William Styron, whose own depression brought him to the brink of suicide as well. Styron believes that depressives contemplate suicide “[not] because of any frailty, and rarely out of impulse, but because they are in the grip of an illness that causes almost unimaginable pain. . . . In the popular mind, suicide is usually the work of a coward or sometimes, paradoxically, a deed of great

courage, but it is neither; the torment that precipitates the act makes it often one of blind necessity.” He insists that we see suicide in new terms: “[Levi] succumbed to a disease that proved to be malignant, and not a shred of moral blame should be attached to the manner of his passing.”³³

Such an understanding, however, does not change the need to fight the disease’s malignancy. A second point I think crucial, then, is that healing *is* possible, and even likely. Most people *do* recover from even the most severe depression, especially if they get good help, though many continue to struggle with it periodically. In this process the rebirth of hope is the most essential step. Again, Styron is eloquent:

those who are suffering a siege, perhaps for the first time, [must] be told – be convinced, rather – that the illness will run its course and that they will pull through. . . . It may require on the part of friends, lovers, family, admirers, an almost religious devotion to persuade the sufferers of life’s worth, which is so often in conflict with a sense of their own worthlessness, but such devotion has prevented countless suicides.³⁴

It is tempting but often false to believe that depression is a matter of will power and mental attitude, that people can just “snap out of it” if they really want to, if they know we’re “there for them,” if they just adjust their behavior, their diet, or their attitude. These beliefs are just about as useful in cases of severe depression as expecting someone with a broken leg or tuberculosis to simply “snap out of it.” Jane Kenyon’s acute, deeply felt poem “Having it Out with Melancholy” includes an equally pernicious Christian variation: “You wouldn’t be so depressed / if you really believed in God.”³⁵ Faith can be crucial in recovery from depression, but to blame depression on a lack of faith is both unhelpful and ignorant.

Finally, the severely depressed need to get help that is professional and sustained. Breaking the silence is a start, but often only a start. The treatment options I mentioned earlier, imperfect as they are, are far better than in the past. There are many things that can be done but only if those in need find their way – and are guided or pushed, if necessary – to the best treatment available. None of us can help everyone but we must do all we can to see that no one goes into the darkness alone.

It is a serious matter to bring someone back . . .

Ella Stalter Ringenberg died on a spring day in 1963, not quite a month past her sixty-second birthday. That I should be speaking of her must seem strange to her, if she is listening. She was not a woman to seek out or to welcome attention. I believe she lived with the idea that she should, must, be satisfied with things as they were, and that this belief served her quite well for a long time, and then not so well. We will not know what thoughts she had those last weeks and days of her life, what demons she struggled with or what prayers she raised. Even the circumstances of her passing are not clear, and I will say no more about them. I know that I have transgressed already on her privacy and that of her family, and I hope to be forgiven for putting into cold print these fragments of her story.

Let her rest in peace now. But let her also not be forgotten. Let us remember that she needed a kind of help that even those who knew and loved her, who were close by and tried their best, could not figure out how to give her. Let us not blame them. But let us learn to do better.

The little brick house is still there on Main Street, though Art's nightshirts have not hung in its closets for a long time now, and Ella has long since stopped reading books and passing out quarters to the grandchildren who spend quiet nights with her. Their own children are already nearly grown. Her murmuring voice still lingers in my memory, losing a few wisps of substance each day; it is even and low, with a burr that only hints at what might be happening within as she reads someone else's words to the skinny, slightly uneasy little boy on her lap. There is love in the voice for me, and if there is not quite enough love there to stretch over herself, how can a child be expected to know that?

Hope is not a luxury. It is as necessary as water, air, or food. It can be nurtured and encouraged if it cannot be created from nothing. I am not talking about foolish optimism or silly promises that everything will be just fine. The hope I mean is inextricable from those other great, difficult necessities that Paul spoke of: faith and love. This hope is perhaps austere, obviously complicated; certainly it contains a full awareness that none of our lives will or should be free from pain and trouble and loss. But it is a hope that we can live, act, speak, love, and worship; and that we can serve our brothers and sisters

as we receive their service to us, and in so doing find meaning in the midst of all our troubles.

In a quite real sense depression is a land of the dead. Like that other great and mysterious land – that which lies beyond true, physical death – it is a murky, frightening realm. But it is one that we must dare to enter, if we are to live up to our promise to bear each others' burdens. It is a serious matter to bring someone back from the dead lands of depression, too serious and difficult for any one of us to accomplish on our own. But it is work that urgently needs doing. The night may be long and dark, but we have the promise that joy cometh in the morning.³⁶

Notes

¹ New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950.

² "How Much Does Depression Cost Society?" *The Harvard Mental Health Letter* (Oct. 1994). <<http://www.mentalhealth.com/mag1/p5h-dp01.html>> 12 August 1998.

³ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 359.

⁴ "Manufacturing Madness: Destroying Sanity," *Psychiatry Manipulating Creativity* (Citizens Commission on Human Rights, 1997). <<http://www.cchr.org/art/eng/page12.htm>> 12 August 1998.

⁵ Peter D. Kramer, *Listening to Prozac: The Landmark Book About Antidepressants and the Remaking of the Self* (New York: Penguin, 2nd ed. 1997); R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (New York: Pantheon, 1960); Seth Farber, *Madness, Heresy, and the Rumor of Angels: The Revolt Against the Mental Health System* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993); David A. Karp, *Speaking of Madness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (New York: Oxford, 1996).

⁶ For a survey of these and other treatment options, see Arthur Schwartz and Ruth Schwartz, *Depression Theories and Treatments: Psychological, Biological, and Social Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁷ *The Cherry Orchard*, Act One, in *Literature: An Introduction to Reading*, ed. Lee Jacobus (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 1208. There is general consensus among researchers that major depression is a physical disorder in which brain chemistry malfunctions. Research has focused on the role of neurotransmitters such as norepinephrine and serotonin, and most drugs currently in use seem to work by regulating levels of those chemicals (see Schwartz and Schwartz, 64ff.). Researchers struggle to observe and measure subtle processes within the brain without invasive procedures, and their work remains speculative and incomplete.

⁸ I would like to thank those who spoke with or wrote to me as I researched this essay for their advice, insights, stories, and counsel on a wide range of matters. I fear this list is not complete,

but it must include Dennis Stoesz, John Sharp, Elizabeth Kelly, John Martin, Ruth Krall, Beth Martin Birkey, Ervin Beck, Scott Holland, Julia Kasdorf, Lisa Robeson, Jerry Kennell, Bill and Gayle Trollinger, Dorothy Nickel Friesen, Victor Vogt, Viola and Allen Horst, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Ted Koontz, Victor Jerrett Enns, Freda Zehr, Phyllis Bixler, G.C. Waldrep, Jack and Marcella Stalter, Arlene and Roger Gundy, Jan (Gundy) Yoder, Marlyce (Martens) Gundy, and Ada (Stalter) Springer. It was Steve Estes who told me of a relative who spoke of the disease of “Mennonite Melancholia.” (Please note that this is NOT a list of depression sufferers.)

⁹ See Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press, 1993), on the links between manic-depressive illness and poets and artists. Among many first-person accounts of depression and manic depression, see Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of My Moods and Madness* (New York: Vintage, 1995); Martha Manning, *Undercurrents: A Life Beneath the Surface* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); Andrew Solomon, “Anatomy of Melancholia,” *The New Yorker* (12 Jan. 1998):44-61; and William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (New York: Vintage, 1990). See Jane Kenyon’s *Constance* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 1993) for a recent book of poems dealing extensively and lyrically with depression.

¹⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1927), 214-15.

¹¹ John Keats, “Ode on Melancholy,” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed. Ed. Alexander W. Allison, et al. (New York: Norton, 1983), 662-63.

¹² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “[I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, Not Day].” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed., 859.

¹³ Merna Sutter and Arlene Gundy, personal interview, Flanagan, Illinois, 7 June 1996.

¹⁴ See David L. Pauls, Lois A. Morton, Janice A. Egeland, “Risks of Affective Illness Among First-Degree Relatives of Bipolar I Old-Order Amish Probands,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 49 (Sept. 1992): 703-708, for a study of bipolar disorders among the Amish which concludes that “children of bipolar probands [individuals] in the Amish community are at a significantly higher risk for illness than [those individuals’] parents or siblings” (707). The authors suggest that both genetic and nongenetic risk factors may be at work.

¹⁵ “Stalter-Ringenberg,” *Flanagan Home Times*, Sept. 1923.

¹⁶ Willard Smith, *Mennonites in Illinois* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 481.

¹⁷ Personal interview, Flanagan, Illinois, 28 July 1998.

¹⁸ John Henry Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 78-79.

¹⁹ For a history of these institutions see Vernon H. Neufeld, ed., *If We Can Love: The Mennonite Mental Health Story* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press), 1983.

²⁰ “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1914-1916), 245.

²¹ *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), 18.

²² Victoria L. Smith, “A Story beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” *PMLA* 114. 2 (1999): 196.

²³ *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 4.

²⁴ See Schwartz and Schwartz, 312.

²⁵ Terrence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (New York: Simon and Schuster Fireside, 1997), 22.

²⁶ Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia: James, Otto, Jung, and Erikson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 8.

²⁷ Kristeva, 13, emphasis hers.

²⁸ Freda Zehr, 21 Oct 1998, e-mail on www.mennolink.org. Used by permission of the author.

²⁹ Julius H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 238.

³⁰ Kathleen Kern's *When It Hurts to Live: Devotions for Difficult Times* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1994), one of the first books by a Mennonite to address depression in the context of faith, wisely counsels both faith and patience: "arriving at the simple solution to our depression can be maddeningly complex. . . . [We] find [our]selves unraveling a complex web of family history, stress, emotional disturbances and physical ailments." In *No Longer Alone: Mental Health and the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), John Toews and Eleanor Loewen offer a broader perspective on faith and mental health in a brief account meant, like Kern's, for study in Sunday School classes. Their chapter on depression — titled "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" — is sympathetic and knowledgeable. Neither book is meant to "cure" depression, but each may be useful starting points in understanding the condition.

³¹ William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 17.

³² Victor Jerrett Enns, personal e-mail, 5 May 1998.

³³ "Why Primo Levi Need Not Have Died," *New York Times* (19 Dec. 1986), 17.

³⁴ Styron, 76

³⁵ Kenyon, 22.

³⁶ My thanks to Walter Sawatzky for suggesting this final image.

Communication Technology and the Development of Consciousness: Reframing the Discussion of Anabaptists and Postmodernity

Daniel Liechty

Postmodernism has been defined variously and used differently in different contexts.¹ I begin by laying out explicitly my assumptions for this essay. After receiving graduate degrees in religion and theology, I continued professional training in clinical social work, which is an interdisciplinary profession combining the perspectives of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with the sociological perspectives of systems theory and social processes. Consequently, when I approach the question, “What is postmodernism?” I do not think of it in terms of a social, political, or philosophical movement in the abstract, nor as a disembodied aesthetic style. Rather, I think of postmodernism as a style of consciousness, a set of mental habits, a conglomerate of common sense notions about the world and how one navigates or negotiates action within that world. This style of consciousness can be compared with and contrasted to other styles of consciousness. I also look for the specific material conditions in which contrasting styles of consciousness are rooted and which bring these styles to fruition.

What follows is a brief outline of four such styles of consciousness, which I call the Ancient, Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern styles. I suggest that each of these styles corresponds to specific material conditions which I designate as “communications technology.” I then place sixteenth-century Anabaptism within this scheme of consciousness, and finally I indicate areas where the heirs of Anabaptism might contribute positively in a world characterized by the emerging postmodern style of consciousness.

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I

My reflections are based mainly on three very different but important books. The first, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, was published some twenty years ago by a Princeton professor of psychology, Julian Jaynes.² The second appeared a decade ago and was widely reviewed in the popular press: *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman.³ The third came out quite recently: *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* by anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram.⁴

In his book, Jaynes reported on a quest for the origins of human self-consciousness, that aspect of the individual human ego which fosters self-reflection and psychological interiority. Humans have this attribute, other animals apparently do not. Therefore, it must have appeared in the course of human evolution, whether suddenly or gradually. We commonly assume it is this very aspect of our psychology that makes us ‘human,’ and that all of those ancestors we identify as human must have shared this style of consciousness. What struck Jaynes as he examined the oldest written texts of human history was that we do not find indications of this style of consciousness present in the most ancient written texts. What we find in these texts are not people who act as a result of interior reflection and internal dialogue, but people who act in simple and quite direct obedience to the commands of voices they understand to be the voices of gods. The genius of Jaynes’ work is that, rather than ignore this evidence or explain it away on the basis of modern disbelief in such gods, he took it seriously and hypothesized that ancient people did indeed hear such voices. Jaynes suggested that obedience to what is understood to be the external commands of gods is a distinctive style of consciousness made possible by a distinctive organization of information in the human brain. This he labeled the *bicameral mind*.

Drawing on a growing pool of brain function studies from a wide variety of disciplines, Jaynes began to see that what we call self-consciousness, the human sense of self or ego, is a metaphor for how our brains organize and process information. We might say it is the particular configuration of our hard drive, to use a computer analogy.⁵ Yet we know from working with brain-injured people that the human brain is able to organize information and

functioning in many different ways when influenced to do so by external circumstances. In the twenty years since Jaynes published his work, this pool of brain function studies has increased exponentially in number, scope, and exactness, now aided by new technologies such as CAT scanning and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which yield visual images of functioning brain fields. All of this new work, unavailable to Jaynes, clearly supports the hypothesis on brain development and functioning on which he based his thesis.⁶

All of the best clinical and experimental data, child developmental data, as well as clinically based narrative observations (as found, for example, in Oliver Sacks's popular writings) point toward the conclusion that the human brain is very plastic in relation to its environment. Based on this conclusion, Jaynes suggested there is no concrete reason to insist that the brains of ancient humans were organized or configured in exactly the same way as our own. In other words, if we approach the known data without prejudice or bias, we must hold as at least plausible the notion that ancient people commonly had quite a different style of consciousness from our own. As Jaynes wrote:

The brain is more capable of being organized by the environment than we have hitherto supposed and therefore could have undergone such a change as from bicameral to [self] conscious man mostly on the basis of learning and culture.⁷ . . . The brain teems with redundant centers, each of which may exert direct influence on a final common pathway, or modulate the operation of others, or both, their arrangements able to assume many forms and degrees of coupling between constituent centers [The human brain] provides an organism where the early developmental history of the individual can make a great difference in how the brain is organized.⁸

Applying these ideas to human evolutionary history, the picture Jaynes presented is one of primitive hominids slowly emerging from the kind of consciousness we see commonly in dogs, cats, and higher primates through a specific communication technology, the development and use of human language. These early beings were not self-conscious, however. They communicated mainly through gestures, mimetic actions, and symtonic vocalizations. But as human language developed, it began to first incorporate

and then supplant these gestures, actions and vocalizations, eventually creating the bicameral style of consciousness. In bicameral consciousness, the thought side of the brain is not connected to the action side of the brain through the metaphorical, symbolic self, which in modern consciousness ties these two sides together. The person, identified with action, therefore perceived the promptings from the thought side of the brain (that which we moderns perceive as an internal, verbal dialogue or narrative) to be external commands from external sources. Nothing we know from brain studies would preclude this bicameral organization of consciousness, and much suggests it would be an expected *intermediary stage* between the type of consciousness we see in certain other animal species and our own modern style.

Because there are no written sources from before there was writing, we obviously have no direct access into human consciousness in this early stage of development. Much of Jaynes's hypothesizing was based on educated inference and speculation, which is perhaps one reason that his book has been overlooked these past two decades. It didn't help the clinicians do therapy and it didn't contain charts and data for the experimentalists; therefore, it had no natural constituency or community of supporters within its discipline.⁹ As Jaynes noted, we begin to have sources rendering direct access into the consciousness of human beings only with the advent of a new communications technology, namely writing. He suggested, however, that in the most ancient of written sources, such as the oldest sections of the Bible, the *Iliad* and other such sources, we do catch a fleeting glimpse of this ancient style of consciousness in its very end stage, just as it was being displaced by the style of consciousness which emerges with writing.

What I am designating as the pre-modern style of consciousness, in which a rudimentary sense of self or ego begins to develop, is made possible by the development of writing. With writing, the directly communicating voices of the gods begin to disappear, a phenomenon noticed and puzzled over by many modern commentators.¹⁰ Like Jaynes, David Abram combed ancient literature for his clues in exploring this juncture, but he is also tuned in experientially, through shamanistic training gained during his field studies in anthropology, to the styles of conscious awareness found even today among contemporary preliterate people. Abram does not cite Jaynes's book and is apparently working completely independently of Jaynes's ideas. Nevertheless, though

both his terminology and his focus of attention differ considerably from those of Jaynes, there is an amazing congruence between these two writers in presenting what Abram calls the *preliterate consciousness* and what Jaynes calls the bicameral mind.

Abram suggests that the preliterate style of consciousness does not think of itself as separate from the non-human world (what he calls the *more-than-human world*). Such a person hears in the calls of birds and animals, the rushing river and in the rustling of the wind a communication just as real and intentional as is heard in human speech. This person would in fact think of human speech as being in the same category as the calls and cries of birds, animals, and the wind. Communication utilizes all senses, not only (or even always primarily) sight and sound.

The preliterate consciousness does not have a strong sense of individuality or symbolic self. When asked to reflect on his or her motives for a particular action, such a person more likely thinks of himself or herself in the third person plural than the first person singular (e.g., “sons of Motzi go here this time of year”). Like Jaynes, Abram suggests that the advent of writing eventually broke down this style of consciousness and expelled human beings from the garden of lushly sensual existence to a place where the gods (and birds, animals, trees, rivers, mountains . . .) no longer speak.

The pre-modern style of consciousness is characterized by an emerging sense of self that comes through literacy. But this literacy and its attendant style of consciousness is available only to an elite, and is then communicated verbally to the masses of people who cannot read and do not have access to the written texts in which the voices of the gods are now found. The pre-modern consciousness is the consciousness of a society, therefore, which embraces both the tortured, introspective inner life of an Augustine of Hippo as well as the consciousness of his contemporary, illiterate serf, slave, or outcast. It is a society where the communication technology of writing is used by an elite to subjugate the illiterate masses. Typically, the masses then respond to this subjugation by periodic outbursts of charismatic, oral authority, authority that place direct access to the gods through personal inspiration above the authority of written texts. These reversals of authority are inherently unstable and short-lived, however. They either disintegrate internally or, more often, through a process the literature calls the *routinization of charisma*, are co-opted by the

literate elite. This instability is unavoidable because oral communication cannot compare to the technology of writing in the task of organizing and routinizing ruling authority for groups larger than a family or tribe. This ongoing dynamic conflict has been noticed by many historians and interpreters of the pre-modern world.

The modern style of consciousness, the consciousness of mass literacy, was made possible by the introduction of the printing press. No longer dependent on an elite to interpret sacred or secular texts of authority, for the first time on a wide social scale each person was able, and then eventually expected, to read and interpret such texts for himself or herself. The modern style of consciousness, the idea of a singular, bounded, integrated, and permanent self, is what emerges when literacy is widely present throughout society and written texts of all kinds are available to everyone.¹¹

As mass literacy evolved, within a few generations a style of consciousness emerged that Neil Postman characterizes as the *typographic mind*, but which we can simply call the modern style of consciousness. This style is a direct result of the self-conscious, reflective pondering formed by reading and writing from a relatively early age. It most highly respects the well-honed, terse, and linear presentation of data leading to a well-defended conclusion, and tends to view human beings as thinking machines, separate from nature. While power of rote memory and awareness of non-visual sense data in a person exhibiting the modern style of consciousness is small compared to one exhibiting the preliterate style, we will expect the modern person to have a very developed attention span with the ability to keep focused without distraction on one subject until it is thoroughly explored. These are the very mental characteristics which come to define intelligence in a literate culture.

The effects of literacy on consciousness, on how the mind organizes and processes information, resulting in the modern style of consciousness, is well summarized by Postman:

From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one's habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the 'analytic management of knowledge.' To engage the

written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. To accomplish this, one must achieve a certain sense of distance from the words themselves, which is, in fact, encouraged by the isolated and impersonal text In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content.¹²

As we have seen, the ancient style of consciousness emerged through the advent of language. We see it only fleetingly in the most ancient human texts, just as it was being replaced by literate-consciousness. The premodern style of consciousness emerged with the advent of writing. As literacy spread among the social elite in many societies and cultures, we begin to see it unmistakably emerging roughly around that very time Karl Jaspers designated as the *axial period* and extending on through to the High Middle Ages. The modern style of consciousness emerged with the printing press and characterizes consciousness roughly from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment through to the present.

I suggest that we are presently in a transitional state in which the advent of a new communications technology, namely the mass distribution of visual images dominated so far by television, but soon to include a wide spectrum of broadcast and receiving options, is facilitating the emergence of a new style of consciousness, a new mental configuration by which the human brain organizes and processes information. This is the postmodern style of consciousness. While we are only in the very beginning stages of this style's birth process, thus precluding any exhaustive exposition of its contents, it is already recognizable enough.

What then is the postmodern style of consciousness? This is where, in all honesty, we should plead ignorance, simply because it is too early to tell. We see in the history of each style of consciousness that some generations pass before the new style fully evolves and filters into a population broad enough to

be noticed. Although the speed with which a new style completes this process is probably increasing, recall that children of the Baby Boomers are the first generation for whom high-speed visual media have been present from their earliest memory. Only very few of these children attended schools where such media, rather than books, were the primary teaching tools. The new media will very likely be the mode of education, however, for their children, our grandchildren, and subsequent generations of those now being born. Yet already we are stultified at how quickly and easily our children take to technologies which we, huddling over program manuals like sacred texts, must spend hours, days, and weeks to barely master.

High-speed visual communications technology, furthermore, is still in process. It has up to now been dominated by commercial television broadcasting, but many observers suggest that this is just a beginning point.¹³ The relatively near future will see a convergence in cyberspace of television technology with personal computing technology, allowing each user to become a selector of information and a broadcaster in his or her own right. The passive television screen is becoming interactive and may even become a mobile object, worn on a regular basis much like eyeglasses. The more we learn about the biochemical functioning of the brain, the more feasible it becomes to link brain functioning with microchip functioning, not only prosthetically (as is already being done, for example, in optic restoration) but creatively.

What sort of consciousness – what kind of brain configuration for the organization and processing of knowledge – might a person develop, who from a very young age, upon awakening, habitually puts on cyberlenses to keep connected throughout the day with an entire virtual world of interactive information and stimulation, and to project that person's own thoughts and images into the virtual world for interaction with others? What sense of self would such a person develop? Where would s/he see the boundaries or containers of his or her mind or symbolic self? Certainly not at the skin line. Certainly not as something internal to the person's body, contained in the head or heart or bowels. Even in these early stages we see this emerging style of consciousness assuming a logic that is non-linear; a protean sense of identity that easily moves with changes in names, life narratives and even gender depending on particular contexts; an attention mechanism able to 'ride astride' many different areas of stimulation at once, and an almost frightening melding

of mind with machine which, for those of us being left behind by this emerging consciousness, culminates in nightmare visions of the Borg species in the *Star Trek* series. Again, I insist that while we are seeing the beginnings of the rise of this new style, it is not given to our generation to know what the final result will be. Yet we would do well to keep a few things in mind.

First, I assume that readers of this article are totally immersed, intellectually, psychologically, culturally, and emotionally in the reading-formed, modern style of consciousness. Our sense of self and habits of thought were formed on the basis of books, on the basis of reading and writing. Scholars are, if anything, hyperattached to the reading-formed style of consciousness. And this is true of everyone who sets forth an interpretation of this phenomenon in a written text, no matter how often intoning the mantra '*postmodern*' in that text. If we do not keep this in mind, we miss a very important point.

Second, not all that is anti-modern is for that reason postmodern. A good portion of what poses as postmodern on the popular and academic booksellers' shelves seems rooted in some claim of having reconnected directly with the voices of the gods, or the dogmatic insistence that the voices of the gods are heard in a very subscribed text or group of texts (and even then, usually only as interpreted by specific people). In light of this analysis, these would indeed be considered anti-modern moves but not in a postmodern direction.

A third point is that for those of us deeply attached to the reading-formed style of consciousness, the emergence of a new style of consciousness can feel very frightening – even apocalyptic. It may seem as though civilization itself is at stake! It seems these kids have mass attention deficit disorder. Judged by the standards of acumen privileged in a reading-based style of consciousness, it seems we are producing a generation of regressive intelligence. We dread the estrangement this development potentially creates between us and our children. It means we are a generation who truly live in a different world, a completely different style of consciousness, from that of our children and grandchildren. When I see the faces of parents watching their small children take to the computer like ducks to water, I think of how a sixteenth-century European peasant must have felt – that mixture of joyful pride and dread of loss – watching his or her child heading off to the monastery school or to university.

II

What of sixteenth-century Anabaptism? In light of my analysis, we see that, as with every movement of protest against the power of a literate elite, a very early struggle within the Anabaptist movement concerned whether it would claim its authority based on a connection to the charismatic, mystical, and direct voice of God, or whether it would claim its authority based on the written text. While detailed demonstration cannot be undertaken here, it will suffice to say that this controversy echoed clearly through the earliest years of the movement: between various fountainheads of Anabaptism (Swiss textualism and South German-Austrian charisma); in key disputes between early leaders (Menno's textualism and David Joris's charisma); and even as an internal struggle within key leaders (Hans Hut appealing to the text one moment and crying "Bibel, Beebel, Babel!" the next, proceeding on the basis of charismatic inspiration).

True to the predictable pattern, the textualists finally won out. Charismatic authority either self-destructed in anarchy (Muensterites, Baderites, Batenburgers) or was routinized and co-opted by the textualists (Menno Simons, for one, seemed at times quite conscious of this as he attempted to regather the flock after the Muenster debacle). The evolving triumph of the textualists runs on exactly parallel tracks to the *Protestantization* of the Anabaptist movement. Protestantism was the major social result in the sixteenth century of the spread of literacy. Luther and Calvin both were quite sure that the future of their movement depended on there being a "Bible on every kitchen table," and they were quite correct in this perception. Once the heirs of the Anabaptist movement established that they were entitled to their own peculiar hermeneutical readings of the privileged text, there was little internal opposition to taking their place as one among other denominations within a larger Protestant identity. The "sect" designation eventually became an embarrassment to them.

Much of the historiographical discussion of whether Anabaptists are best understood as medieval monastics and mystics or as consistent Protestants or even as early bourgeois revolutionaries turns largely on whether our attention is focused on the charismatics or the textualists. Without getting into that discussion or the related controversies surrounding questions of Anabaptism and modernity, I would only suggest that in light of the present analysis,

Anabaptism was unquestionably a midwife in the emergence of the reading-formed, modern style of consciousness, if for no other reason than the key role it played in spreading literacy to the lower classes. This spread of literacy to all classes finally broke the power of the literate elite to control social processes through a monopoly on interpretation of the privileged texts. Some of the most fascinating pieces of *Anabaptistica* from that period are the prison dialogues recorded in *The Martyrs Mirror*, where an educated monk confronts an Anabaptist stump-preacher and is astounded to realize that the old mystifications of the biblical text won't work here because this uneducated hedge-preacher has read the text for himself and has the audacity to hold to his own interpretation! "*Where did you learn to read,*" the monks howl! "*Oh you Anabaptists are of the devil himself, which is proved by the fact that no sooner do you pour water on the head of an uneducated ignoramus than he can read not only the Bible but all that crazy literature you people write yourselves!*" Likewise, while Luther and Calvin may have envisioned a Bible on every kitchen table, both of them would have preferred to retain the ability to establish one official line of interpretation of that Bible. The history of their movements is a testimony to the instability of that course once literacy and consciousness of the right to interpret for oneself were widespread among their followers.

While there is reason enough to suggest that in its earliest stages we might characterize Anabaptism as neither Protestant nor Catholic (i.e., during the period when appeals to charismatic authority for resistance to the Catholic or Protestant ruling classes carried as much weight as appeals to the privileged text), Anabaptism was very soon Protestantized. The textualists won out cleanly (future protesters within the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement would appeal to independent interpretations of the text but hardly ever to non-textual, charismatic authority), and Anabaptism fully embraced the reading-formed style of consciousness, itself producing texts of inner spiritual struggle and wrestling with God and conscience to rival those of Protestant piety anywhere.

III

The deterritorialization of the self is the essential feature that marks human entry into cyberspace. In the universe of infinite connection and possibility the only possible ontology is magical; reality as that which is invoked, the world conformant to will. The techniques of magical will, quintessentially linguistic, require a conscious mastery of the relationship between word and world. At the end of history comes the Word Ritual is the bridge between the ego and the post-historical self The speed-up stress of cyberspace, unleashed on the island self, forces being to seek shelter in the enduring forms of myth; neither one nor another, but this and that, choosing milieu over destination, multiplicity over deterritoriality, and subjectivity over factuality.

The gate between the historical self and post-historical post-humanity, the passage between a particular island of factuality and the absolute subjective, is ritual. Now we enter closets and bend ourselves to the dictates of fashion and gender, language and culture. Soon, we cast magic circles in sacred groves, speak the Word, and bend the World to our ends. The ego can not survive this burst of power, any more than the animal survived the flash of consciousness; what follows us we can now hear, but we can not speak of it.¹⁵

New styles of consciousness as they emerged have been the consciousness of social elites. It is no different with the postmodern style of consciousness, all pseudo-radical rhetoric notwithstanding. A new style of consciousness may be anti-establishmentarian in a political or economic sense, to the extent that the political and economic establishment is yet tied to the earlier style of consciousness. But it will be a rebellion of that society's highly educated sector, the one that enjoys ongoing sustained access to the new communications technology on which the emerging style is based, in addition to the leisure required to establish it in society's arts and sciences. As we consider possible constructive contributions from the Anabaptist tradition in a world characterized by postmodern consciousness, we should realize that at least for now, we are looking mainly at European-origin Mennonites of middle and

upper middle class status. It may well be that among other Mennonites (the majority!) the consciousness movement will solidify the reading-based style for some generations to come. There is an uneasiness about elitism among academic and urban professional purveyors of the Anabaptist Vision which, coupled with the natural suspicions we who keep our eggs in the reading-based basket have toward the emerging style of consciousness, tempts us to reject that consciousness with righteous indignation. Let us not forget, however, that when we speak of that elitist group of European-origin Mennonites, highly educated and with ongoing sustained access to the newest communications technologies, we are speaking very literally of our own biological progeny, our own sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I cannot dismiss them with righteous indignation, no matter how much their emerging style of consciousness confuses and threatens me.

So then, what contribution does Anabaptism have to make to a postmodern world? In the strictest, sixteenth century sense, none. The symbol of adult baptism no longer communicates much of anything to anyone, even within the group itself, no matter how many times it receives new interpretive dressing with which to present itself. And the central tenet that adults have the right to read and interpret religious texts for themselves and to hold personal religious convictions based on that interpretation is now axiomatic in the wider society and culture. Ironically, Anabaptism appears to have been made superfluous by the widespread acceptance of its own most basic principles. In a wider sense, though, contributions could well be made by the linear and spiritual descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, those who choose to include the story of those earlier Anabaptists as an integral part of their personal and group narrative in the postmodern world.

The positive contributions which could be made are hindered so long as Mennonite people continue to seek their sources of authority exclusively in the written word, that is, in a spiritual unity held firm by doctrinal conformity. This was a strategy of modernity, but conditions of communication have changed. Many of the various fundamentalisms of the word proliferating now are, in light of this discussion, inherently unstable. While claiming to point to the written word as the source for authority and rationality, they simultaneously and rigorously promote the very communications technologies that undermine reading in favor of visual image. This finally forces them into a position in which

their unity increasingly depends on the ability of their power elite to control both the interpretation of texts and the production and consumption of images among their group. This attempt to control is doomed by the complexity and number of information sources in postmodern society, leaving them in a position where, through such tactics as Disney boycotts and school book bannings, they must then try to establish control for society as whole. This is the material root of the current so-called “culture wars.” If Mennonites continue to seek their sources of rationality and self-identity exclusively in the written word, seeking to control acceptable symbol-meanings within the group through forced doctrinal conformity, they will only succeed in creating their own mini-versions of “culture war” among themselves. We see this process happening already, and it will be our own progeny who will be alienated from the group by it.

The emerging style of consciousness is skeptical of appeals to the written word as the exclusive source for authority and rationality. Such appeals ignore and attempt to deny the inherent relativism in all communicative acts. These appeals are a rationalization for forcing closure while hiding other, more material interests. They are a method for promoting unity by wielding the authoritarian power to exclude and divide. To employ a circle metaphor, while claiming to hold the center from crumbling, they spend their energy militantly patrolling the edges.

The source for authority and rationality that will be increasingly privileged in the postmodern world is the willingness to act individually and collectively, and is in fact speech-action itself. In postmodern society (as best as I can prognosticate after having warned explicitly against such prognostication) we would expect that once the dust begins to settle, it will be through a pluralistic religious life whose unity is based on shared ethical concerns, rather than doctrine or mystical claims, that the gospel message of love will be communicated with integrity.¹⁶ Here the legacy of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists has much to offer, because Anabaptist spirituality, the energy that motivated their speech-action in their time, is easily translated into concretely ethically-oriented propositions,¹⁷ as outlined below:

(1) *The immediacy of the human relationship with God.* Each human being can approach God directly without mediation. God is ever and always present to the believer. There is no need to seek God through the mediation of a priest,

a textual canon, or any other human hierarchy. There are no times or places, special foods or ceremonies, which mediate communion with God. Anti-sacramentalism is a radical Protestant principle at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality.¹⁸

(2) *Christian faith defined as a life of discipleship patterned on nonviolent love.* This is the formative interpretive or hermeneutical principle at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality. The nature of the Christian life is understood as becoming increasingly more like Jesus, in spirit, mind, attitude, deed, and communion with God. This occurs as disciples seek to practice the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives. This cannot be understood in a legalistic fashion without perverting the very nature of the discipleship, because Jesus did not address directly and specifically most of the issues which disciples must address as we enter into the third millennium. To pretend otherwise, reading the limited texts we have pertaining to Jesus's life and teachings as if they speak directly and unequivocally to all issues in our day, at best ignores or hides the aspect of interpretation and the dynamics of power contained therein. Stated more directly, it demonstrates a completely ahistorical, magical-type thinking that is out of place in Anabaptist discipleship. That discipleship in a postmodern context may positively understand itself as a process of becoming more like Jesus as noted above. It is absolutely centered on Jesus. At the same time, while unapologetically and self-consciously *Christomorphic*, there is no need to continue in the mode of *Christocentric* exclusivity. It is welcomed confirmation, and no threat to the integrity of one's own truth, when congruent teachings and examples of a life of nonviolence come from sources other than Jesus and places other than the Christian religion.

(3) *The corporate nature of the Christian faith.* Although the Anabaptist understanding of discipleship emphasized the personal nature of commitment to that way of life, this personal commitment was not an extension of the philosophy of autonomous individualism that became dominant in modernity's reading-based style of consciousness. This principle is at the heart of Anabaptist spirituality and has acted as a counterforce to modernist expressions of autonomous individualism, as found, for example, in disproportionate emphasis placed on "personal salvation" in American evangelical revivalist

tradition. I suggest it is this principle of the corporate nature of the Christian faith toward which some scholars were groping when they wrote of the “medieval/monastic” tendencies in Anabaptist spirituality. There is a less confusing source for the presence of this tendency in the collective history, however. For sociological reasons of survival in face of persecution, Anabaptists and later Mennonites were forced to rely on each other for spiritual and material support, and thus were not, as a group, attracted to autonomous individualism as a moral philosophy. When echoes of this philosophy did appear in Anabaptist/Mennonite collective experience, it was usually in the context of a split within the group, thus associating this philosophy with a sour taste in that experience. Despite recent incursions of autonomous individualism among Mennonites (mainly through contacts with Protestant fundamentalism), specifically Anabaptist spirituality has historically understood that discipleship patterned on nonviolent love, the defining characteristic of Christian faith, is a corporate, social concern. It is in and through the proving and sharing of the gathered group of disciples that wisdom and direction are given to the individual for addressing existential issues in a manner consistent with the pattern of Jesus’s life and teachings, especially where these issues are far different from and more complex than anything a first-century person, or a sixteenth century person, could have imagined. That is, *a lifestyle of the politics of Jesus*, as we move into the third millennium, is plainly and affirmatively a communal endeavor.

While upholding central Christian ethical concerns, this approach is inherently open to sources of truth originating in the historical experiences of others. It does not force us into either closing ourselves off to other sources of truth or coercing others into accepting our truth. If, as we move toward a world characterized by the postmodern style of consciousness, Mennonites and other Anabaptist Christians begin to understand what we are doing in these concretely ethically-oriented categories, we open the doors to participate in the good news of God’s love and to communicate that good news with integrity with our neighbors and fellow planetary inhabitants. My hope is for an increasing appropriation of this vision of life and of Christian faith in the postmodern world.¹⁹

This leads me to conclude that in our state of limited knowledge about the future and the natural anxiety that it entails, especially for those of us locked

emotionally and psychologically into a reading-formed style of consciousness, it is probably wisest to avoid the extremes of denial and apocalyptic visions of the decline of civilization on the one hand, and the ecstatic New Age hymns to the dawning Age of Aquarius on the other. In the face of an open and unknown future, we see the theological wisdom of Sir John M. Templeton's "humble approach," recognizing that human understanding and comprehension of God is also open and that current formulations must be taken as working hypotheses rather than as dogmas, set in stone.²⁰ On the positive side, we can teach our children good communal values, teach them to love one another and to care for the weak; then we must turn them over in trust to do their best in the world. After we have done this, we are left to live with the anxiety that their world is not our world, and that we must let them be in their world – which is to say, I suppose, we must put our trust in God.

Notes

¹ This essay was read at the Anabaptists and Postmodernity conference held at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, in August 1998.

² Julian Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mufflin Company, 1976).

³ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985).

⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

⁵ This use of computer hardware and software is only an analogy. The assumption that the brain and body (the physical) is separate and separable from the mind (information) is so much a habit of our thinking that this analogy runs the risk of continuing the Cartesian model. My perspective is a conscious if not always successful attempt to understand brain and mind as a profound and inseparable unity. From this understanding, it follows not only that the physical aspect of the brain is intricately connected to the environment to which it is exposed (e.g., in the strength and complexity of the synaptic network) but also that the ways the brain responds to stimuli (what sort of mind the brain develops) are also intimately connected to cultural factors. The biological brain has developed and develops at the speed of biological evolution. However, the configuration of the brain, what sort of mind the brain produces, develops at the speed of cultural evolution. The entire system of brain, mind, body and culture, therefore, are best understood as an organic unity in which what occurs in each area produces direct but essentially unpredictable effects in each of the other areas. This picture is very different in function and development from Descartes' mechanical-clock-plus-soul model. For a useful discussion, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*:

Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain (New York: The Putnam Group, 1994).

⁶ See, “The Psychology and Neuropsychology of Consciousness” in Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Gueven Guezeldere, eds., *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 185-292.

⁷ Jaynes, 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122f.

⁹ Were Jaynes writing today, his book would enjoy considerable support within the field, specifically from a growing group of psychologists, sociologists, biologists, genetic researchers, and philosophers who are applying evolutionary models to the development of mind and self consciousness. See, for instance: Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Anne Harrington, *Medicine, Mind and the Double Brain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Stanley I. Greenspan, *The Growth of the Mind* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997); Henry Plotkin, *Evolution in Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1998); Michael McGuire and Alfonso Troisi, *Darwinian Psychiatry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); John McCrone, *The Ape That Spoke: Language and the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1991); Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991); Ned Block, Owen Flanagan and Gueven Guezeldere, eds., *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates* (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Most recently, for example, by Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

¹¹ Walter Truett Anderson notes that “the use of the word *self* as a prefix, as in ‘self-determination’ or in ‘self-realization,’ first appears in English in the sixteenth century, and multiplies rapidly in use in the seventeenth century. Self-determination as a specific term first appears in the seventeenth century.” Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997), 210f.

¹² Postman, 51. Postman’s references are to Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and to Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen Books, 1982).

¹³ Examples here are George Gilder, *Life After Television* (Knoxville, TN: Whittle Direct Books, 1990) and Michael G. Zey, *Seizing the Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

¹⁴ Anyone interested in further exposure to this emerging high-speed visuals-formed style of consciousness could, via a number of websites, spend some time with the work of virtual-reality-architect Marcos Novak and his Advanced Design Research Group at the University of Texas at Austin. Marcos’s ventures into “liquid architecture” point in the direction of this emerging style of consciousness in its relation to self and space. Says Marcos: “Most people associate architecture with built materials – wood, brick, mortar and stone. The things I do involve building architecture out of information When we experience the outside world . . . we do so with our inner consciousness. The world remains outside but our experience is internal Our consciousness itself comes from our ability to create a pocket of virtual space inside our minds that’s a mirror of the actual space outside. What I try to do is take this mirror of the world in the seat of my consciousness and put it back outside my body, in the public realm. I can give it to you

to share. And you can do that as well . . . Virtual reality is about visiting possible worlds. Discussion of this work is found in Keith J. Devlin, *Life By the Numbers* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1998), 54f.

¹⁵ Mark Pesce, "Ritual and the Virtual," from his website at www.hyperreal.org/~mpesce.

¹⁶ I have been advocating this view for some years (cf. Daniel Liechty, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990)). Correspondence with this view is strongly suggested in numerous places in a recent survey analysis by Jeffrey P. Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: HarperEdge/HarperCollins, 1997).

¹⁷ Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 9-14.

¹⁸ There is plenty of room for investment of the sacred in sacramental ritual 'from below.' Postmodern Anabaptists are likely to appreciate a wide range of experiential and experimental acquaintance with many styles of communal worship. These are understood as human practices, expressions of particular cultural styles, and not as exclusive rituals for divine mediation. In light of this analysis, however, I am skeptical of the recent advocacy among some of the Mennonite tradition for a return to ritual practices most commonly associated with the Roman Catholic tradition, as I suspect this is less motivated by postmodern playfulness than by attempted retreat from modernism itself.

¹⁹ The counter-evidence, of course, is the rapid growth of fundamentalist and strongly leader-focused churches and congregations in the past two decades, reversing the trends of previous decades for people to leave these churches and congregations for mainline denominations. (Cf. Scott A. Mathias, "Strict, Conservative Churches Growing," *Christianity Today*, April 15, 1999, 15). It may be that as the symbolic self seems to come unglued as we move ever more fully into a postmodern style of consciousness, people will seek refuge from their anxiety in such authoritarian religion. This may equally be a short-term swing of the pendulum, significant for us mainly because it is happening in our time. Perceived as a pendulum swing, such a movement would indicate not the attractiveness of such churches for populations developing the postmodern style of consciousness, but rather as an anxious strategy of modernity in reaction to that developing style. It will take much more sustained and nuanced investigation than has been done so far to really understand who is joining to these churches and congregations; how congruent congregants' self-understanding is with that of the leadership; how long people stay in these types of congregations and where they go when they do leave; and whether children (those now growing up with sustained exposure to the new communications technology) are retained into adulthood in such congregations.

²⁰ John M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach: Scientists Discover God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981). Given that modern human beings have the characteristic of self-consciousness, the evolutionary idea leads to the conclusion that this characteristic was formed from the bottom up, that it evolved from more primitive states. Thus, in theology, psychology, or any other discipline that takes the evolutionary idea seriously, we cannot continue to theorize on the basis of an explicit or implicit assumption that human self-consciousness appeared full-blown in human history. Even were we to apply the model of punctuated equilibrium to the history of human consciousness (a model assuming rapid advances and plateaus in evolutionary development rather than a steady, slow development), we must assume the likelihood of a number of intermediary phases in the

development of consciousness. This means generation upon generation of biologically human ancestors who did not at all share the modern style of consciousness. This, in turn, means that it would have been impossible for them to have had the same understanding of God as do people who have the modern style of consciousness. Therefore, whether you place the energy for the movement in the development of human consciousness itself, or choose to see that development as a reflection of the Hegelian unfolding Divine Consciousness, or perhaps view these as mutually interactive, one must see that there is evolutionary development in the human God concept. Divine wisdom and self-understanding cannot not locked for eternity in ancient texts or any other gnostic source of authority. Future generations of human beings will have quite different understandings of God consciousness and self-understanding than we do today.

For and Against Milbank: A Critical Discussion of John Milbank's Construal of Ontological Peace

Paul G. Doerksen

I

British theologian John Milbank's career thus far is largely defined by his highly acclaimed book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.¹ His monumental work, widely reviewed and discussed, invokes divergent receptions in the extreme. *Theology and Social Theory*, however, is consistently seen as undeniably important to twentieth-century theological discourse.² But how important is it to Anabaptists? Should we read Milbank, and if so, why? Some virtually equate Milbank's work with Anabaptism. Gregory Baum, for example, describes Milbank as "an Anabaptist or Mennonite Barth" and suggests that Milbank's church is "an Anabaptist, Mennonite ecclesial project, expressed today in the work of John Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas."³ As the title of this article indicates, I am not of one mind regarding the contribution of Milbank to Anabaptist thought.

I will engage here a major tenet of Milbank's argument: his assertion of ontological peace versus nihilistic ontological violence. I hope to show that while an emphasis on ontological peace is a rich resource for peace theology, Milbank's construal is problematic in several ways. I will describe Milbank's presentation of ontological violence and peace, and then show that his portrayal both fails to distinguish carefully between power and violence and posits a problematic acceptance of a "tragic dimension."

Milbank fears that if theology no longer seeks to position, qualify, or criticize other discourses, then inevitably these discourses will position theology. In contrast his project reasserts theology as a master discourse, and

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he provides a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between theology and social theory from Plato to Deleuze.⁴ Milbank's interdisciplinary scholarship aims to reveal theology's captivity to other ideologies.⁵ For Milbank theology comes to be seen as social theory, since the description of reality is no longer in the hands of the sociologist, political scientist, political economist, Hegelian, Marxist, or nihilist. Although theology may make claims that draw on these ideologies, these claims are always disciplined by theology. So, while theology may make metaphysical claims for instance, such claims are (usually) positioned by prior theological commitments.⁶

Having (re)positioned all other ideologies in relation to theology, Milbank begins to make his own theological moves. The key one is the explication of the metaphysics of a nonviolent creation in the hope of providing a counter ontology to the pervasive metaphysics of violence embedded both in Christian and non-Christian discourse.⁷ Instead of conceding that reality is at bottom conflictual (a war of everyone against everyone), Milbank, while refusing to ignore difference, asserts a peaceful reality that can be reclaimed within an alternative community.

In the beginning was violence, according to Nietzsche – violence that was celebrated by the pagan virtues.⁸ Nietzsche and neo-Nietzscheans perceive reality as anarchy that cannot be controlled except by subjecting it to “the will to power” in one way or another.⁹ Nietzsche's perception dictates that violence must be the master of us all and leads to the intolerable notion that “difference” is the only truth – a truth that in its unleashed and unrestrained power has led to twentieth-century concentration camps and to ethnic cleansing. Even when this kind of violence is not fully recognizable, it lurks near the surface, barely concealing the original primordial conflict that is often restrained by sacral order, but only just. Given this belief, Nietzsche was right to see Christianity as *the enemy*, since Christianity is unique in refusing ultimate reality to conflictual phenomena.¹⁰

Milbank is especially concerned by Nietzsche's presentation of the truth of difference, since this nihilistic ontology is being promoted by many postmoderns who see in Nietzsche the only true master of suspicion.¹¹ Against such formidable opponents Milbank seeks to assert an ontology of peace that

cannot enter into dialogue with the Nietzscheans. Rather, we must understand that an ontology of violence is a mythos, and as such

to counter it, one cannot resuscitate liberal humanism, but one can try to put forward an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an ‘ontology of peace’, which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.¹²

This then is Milbank’s answer to the nihilists: a counter-ontology which sees peaceful phenomena, not conflictual, as ultimate reality. Christianity is seemingly unique in the assertion of this counter-ontology, though Judaism may affirm a similar one. In any case, the ontology of peace is implied in narratives about divine creation and redemption – true peace comes not from violence, but *ex nihilo* from God.¹³ The distinction between ontological violence and peace is stark in Milbank’s view. The uniqueness of Christianity is seen most clearly here and legitimates Nietzsche’s focused attack on Christianity as a religion of the weak – not because it is weak but because it undercuts the story of the strong, the *übermensch*.

Any peace or pacification that is sought outside of Christianity’s ontological peace is “founded” as legitimate order or necessary outcome. This founding is fundamentally different from the Christian narrative which merely re-proclaims or re-enacts a peace that is already there.¹⁴ Milbank positions Christianity against the postmodern view of reality as conflict. Nevertheless, he wants to affirm that part of the postmodern insight which reduces

substance to transition, but questions the transcendental reading of transition as conflict The postmodern realization that discourses of truth are so many incommensurable language games does not ineluctably impose upon us the conclusion that the ultimate, overarching game is the play of fate, force and chance.¹⁵

Milbank is heavily influenced by Augustine. For Fergus Kerr, Milbank’s project is a retrieval and reworking of Augustine’s theological reading of history in *De Civitate Dei*.¹⁶ This reading helps us to “imagine a state of total peace” which “allows us to unthink the necessity of violence, and exposes the manner in which the assumption of an inhibition of an always prior violence helps to

preserve violence in motion,” and serves to show “there is a way to act in a violent world which assumes the ontological priority of non-violence.”¹⁷

For Milbank, as for Augustine, peace and non-violence are ontologically prior to, and more basic than, the anarchy and strife, which on most views of the world, including gnostic forms of Christianity, are primordial and foundational, so that the religious strategies (if any), like political ones, can do no more than hold it in check.¹⁸

In Milbank’s view ontological peace is more important than an emphasis on virtue. In fact, virtue presupposes justice, and real justice involves real peace. This relationship of virtue and justice necessitates that peace be prior to, and thus more important than, virtue. Milbank makes this argument as part of a larger discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. He does not reject MacIntyre’s work, but wants to go beyond it. For MacIntyre, arguments against nihilism and a philosophy of difference (arguments that Milbank also makes) are made in the name of virtue, dialectics, and the notion of tradition in general. This is inadequate for Milbank, for whom the most important watershed for ethics is not before and after virtue, but war and peace.¹⁹

Milbank is careful to avoid the impression that an ontology of peace is ‘unrealistic.’ He readily admits that the state of peaceableness has not been reached. Peace is not to be slowly constructed; rather it is already given but not yet realized.²⁰

In Christ peace has not, indeed, been totally achieved (a building remains to be built) yet it is proleptically given, because only the perfect saving of one man from the absolute destruction of death, this refusal of the loss of any difference, can initially spell out to us perfect peace.²¹

To focus on Christ alone, however, is not sufficient, since this would produce an ahistorical, abstract figure. Rather, the emphasis must be on Christ as part of the experience of the church, according to Milbank. In Rowan Williams’ opinion, “The insistence on thinking Christ in inseparable relation with the Church is . . . one of the most constructive elements” of Milbank’s book.²² Milbank sees the Gospels as being relatively unconcerned with Jesus as an individual but as presenting Jesus as exemplifying perfect humanity and

sonship, and through this exemplification making a later repetition of that sonship possible within the church.²³ The church, then, is the narrative community which enables us not only to understand ontological peace but to live in peace.

Here Milbank leans especially on Augustine, whose contrast between ontological antagonism and ontological peace is grounded in the contrasting historical narratives of two cities. Within the narrative of the church, we learn to practice peace as a skill and to acquire its idiom – all of which goes far beyond an abstract attachment to non-violence. In order for this possibility to exist, the church and not Christ alone must be at the center of the Christian metanarrative of Augustine’s City of God.²⁴ The practice of the historical church must also be emphasized. If peace is real, then it must appear in the practice of the church as Christian social praxis that seeks to negotiate and embrace difference.²⁵

If we are to say “salvation is a fact,” “salvation has appeared on the historical stage,” then we have to enunciate, not just an ecclesiology, but also an ecclesiology which recounts and resumes the church’s *actual, concrete* intervention in the human social order, where the rules of “non-interference” have not really applied. (Italics in original)²⁶

Milbank’s positing ontological non-violence is important. It offers a real alternative to the despair of nihilism and gives a basis for hope. The grounding of this peace in a historical, contingent community of the church which embodies peace, resists the temptation to discuss peace in the general or the abstract, a move that has limited potential and is ultimately a concession to liberal thought, which is anathema for Milbank.

II

As impressive as Milbank’s project is, it is not impervious to criticism. How is violence to be understood? What is the relation between violence and difference? Can those who are weak accept or experience ontological peace in the same way available to the strong? Can the forgiveness practiced in the church ‘show’ peace? Finally, does Milbank’s allowance for a ‘tragic dimension’ concede too much to ‘reality’?²⁷

While generally supportive of Milbank's position, Nicholas Lash considers whether Milbank ought to distinguish power more carefully from violence. He points out that Milbank follows Nietzsche in defining power as violence and domination. Lash would prefer Milbank to reject the view that all power as such is tainted²⁸:

Rather than eschew all talk of 'power', rather than deny that it is virtuous to be peaceable, the theological task is better seen as taking good words up and purifying them of misuse by setting them in the context of a Christian understanding of God's love.²⁹

Debra Dean Murphy concurs with Lash, but from a feminist perspective. She agrees with Milbank's characterization of nihilistic postmodernism, but finds that

his collapsing of the terms "power" and "violence" risky and problematic – not so much for his critique of nihilism but for the limits it places on his own theological enterprise with its emphasis on "analogically related difference."³⁰

The lack of a clear distinction between power and violence leaves Milbank vulnerable exactly where he needs to be most precise. He predicates ontological peace on the notion that Christianity, embodied specifically in the church, can out-narrate nihilistic violence by subsuming difference without doing violence to it. Just how this must happen, if the exertion of power is essentially the same as violence, is unclear and therefore at the heart of the critiques levelled by both Lash and Murphy. Lash asks the question this way: "Is it quite certain that the strategy for laying violence to one side rather than dialectically engaging with its supposed necessity has the same configuration for the weak as for the strong?"³¹ If total peace is to be real, it must somehow be accessible not only to those who are already in positions of power but also to those whose history is not yet healed or even heard within the church.³²

The feminist critique of Milbank illustrates this point. How might a woman tell the story of peace and promise?³³ Murphy suggests that

to collapse the meanings of 'violence' and 'power' is itself an inherently sexist move which betrays Milbank's debt to Enlightenment/capitalist/male-identified modes of structuring power

that he is seeking to negate. Love is power, peace is power, forgiveness is power, for these things do not require passivity and idleness To allow ‘power’ to be co-opted by Enlightenment ideology . . . is already to fall captive to that very ‘ontology of violence’ that has been exposed as mere mythos, sheer contingency.³⁴

Further, many women who live under the real threat of physical violence need some kind of power to be delivered or to deliver themselves from it.³⁵ To speak of the necessity of power to escape or counter violence does not lead inexorably to more violence that replaces the original violence. The danger is of simply replacing one violence with another, a danger underscoring the crucial necessity of distinguishing between power and violence.

A close reading of *Theology and Social Theory* partly supports Lash and Murphy in their critique but also reveals a misreading of Milbank. It is true that his distinction between power and violence lacks precision and, perhaps more seriously, a concrete display of power without violence is also missing. But to accuse Milbank of not knowing the difference between the two is not accurate. To cite only one example, he discusses the notion that power is an idea, or a fiction, albeit one in which we can become inextricably caught. If this is so, he asks, “Can there not be an alternative invention of a social and linguistic process that is not the dominance of power (*that is to say, of power in the sense of violence*)? (italics added)³⁶ However, since Milbank is not precise and seems to use power as a synonym for will-to-power, he is open to Lash and Murphy’s critique. What is needed is a clearer sense of how power without violence might be construed.³⁷

Milbank’s assertion of ontological peace also suffers from imprecision regarding the practice of forgiveness. In his view, peace and the treatment of difference must find their locus in the church’s emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Christian theology imagines temporal process as the possibility of a historical process into God, and as something recuperable within memory whose ultimate point is the allowing of forgiveness and reconciliation.³⁸

To make his argument, Milbank again draws heavily on Augustine, who claims that without mutual forgiveness and social peace, no-one will be able to see God. The pagans were unjust because they did not give a priority to peace and forgiveness.³⁹ Forgiveness of sins is the way in which we can begin to unthink the necessity of violence.

Given the persistence of the sin of others, (as well as our own sinfulness, which we cannot all at once overcome, but remains alien to our better desires) there is only one way to respond to them which would not itself be sinful and domineering, and that is to anticipate heaven, and act as if their sin was not there, by offering reconciliation.⁴⁰

While Milbank's point is well taken, his description of forgiveness invokes a sense of being incomplete. To "act as if their sin was not there" is to act as if the victim is not there.⁴¹ Even recognizing that there is no such entity as a 'pure' victim, one cannot ignore the fact that acting as if sin was not there is an entirely different thing for some than for others. Rather, "it is only by acknowledging that their sin is there, but dealing with it through a judgement of grace, that we can genuinely achieve reconciliation."⁴² L. Gregory Jones is one theologian who has attempted to describe such a concrete display of forgiveness. While he draws much from Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, he also suggests that the real task is not just to 'unthink' violence but to live differently.⁴³ Milbank is virtually silent here – missing from his book is a concrete display of forgiveness and reconciliation that makes God's peace present.⁴⁴

Finally, Milbank's project must also explain the role of 'tragic necessity' in ontological peace. For example, he suggests that Augustine admits the need for coercion – a need offset by the possibility that the recipient can later come to understand and retrospectively consent. Such action may not be peaceable but can be redeemed.⁴⁵ In an article responding to comments on *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank writes, "Circumstances can force us to sacrifice some good we feel essential to our integrity, or even some person who must be forever missed."⁴⁶

This admission of a tragic dimension allows Milbank to make a somewhat surprising move – the rejection of pacifism. In the same article referred to above, he asserts that "in no sense does *Theology and Social Theory*

recommend ‘pacifism’, and the formal specification of truth as peaceful relation cannot be applied as a criterion authorizing non-resistance.’⁴⁷ This is consistent with a piece he published in 1989, where he engages Stanley Hauerwas’s endorsement of pacifism:

One might ask in relation to a situation like that in South Africa, whether it is not the case that the church there is simply robbed of certain possibilities of realizing certain practices that should define its nature Here exercising peaceableness may be precisely not exercising other Christian virtues such as justice, or even comfort and support of others One can, however, hold out for a tragic refusal of the pacifist position without denying that it is likely that any implication in violence is likely to prove futile in the long run.⁴⁸

While other implications of this move are somewhat unclear (would Milbank follow Augustine in just war theory?), obviously an ontology of peace that includes a tragic dimension is, in the end, a peace that is more tragic than peaceable.

To recommend pacifism (against Milbank) is not to deny tragedy in this world. However, it may be that we are called to absorb a certain amount of tragedy, or perhaps to learn what it may mean to forgive in such a way as to forego the temptation of tragic measures. It may also be that the tragic dimension is better understood as the suffering required to pursue peace. This is a very different kind of tragedy from that of justifying coercive measures or sacrifice of the good.

Perhaps we must see peace as something other than an ontology. However, as noted above, Milbank hesitates to focus on the specifics of Jesus and the Gospels. He sees Jesus as the exemplification of perfect humanity and sonship, as the central origination of the church. The focus for peace becomes the church, which continues to practice, in new ways with variations, the life of the Kingdom. The actual practice of Christ remains much less central than the story of the Church.⁴⁹ Hauerwas has suggested that Milbank’s Christology remains underdeveloped, and hopes that when Milbank does turn to these matters he will not be unsympathetic to the portrayal of Jesus offered in the writings of John Yoder.⁵⁰ If that is the case, Milbank’s assertion of ontology as

a basis for peace, however qualified by theological commitments, needs to be positioned by an understanding of Jesus, his exercise of power, and his life of peace.⁵¹

Notes

¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

² To cite just one example, Richard Roberts has described *Theology and Social Theory* as “perhaps the most brilliant, ambitious – and yet questionable – work to have emerged in English theology since the Second World War” in “Transcendental Sociology? A Critique of John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 527. *Theology and Social Theory* also has the distinction of having two entire volumes of journals given over to its discussion. See *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 305-52, and *Modern Theology* 8 (October 1992).

³ Gregory Baum, “For and Against John Milbank,” in *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 52, 54.

⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1-6, back cover.

⁵ *Theology and Social Theory* “restores the guts to a Christianity often eviscerated by unhappy marriages with predatory ideologies”: Aidan Nichols, “Non Tali Auxilio,” *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 332.

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 189, 190.

⁸ Nicholas Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 354, 355. Milbank’s treatment of Augustine’s version of Roman virtue claims that this virtue is only possible within a circle of violence. Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15 (Fall 1987): 208.

⁹ Fergus Kerr, “Simplicity Itself: Milbank’s Thesis,” *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 309.

¹⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 261, 262.

¹¹ Milbank lumps major postmodern thinkers – Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida – into a basically monolithic group, suggesting that they are “elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy.” *Theology and Social Theory*, 278.

¹² *Ibid.*, 279.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262. This is explained further by Nicholas Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 355.

¹⁴ Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” 211.

¹⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279, 296.

¹⁶ Fergus Kerr, “Rescuing Girard’s Argument?” *Modern Theology* 8 (October, 1992): 387. Kerr’s larger discussion here concerns the relation of Milbank’s work to that of René Girard. Milbank acknowledges Girard’s crucial role in the retrieval of the Augustinian ontology of peace and his move to Christological considerations that is a critical departure from virtue ethics. (*Ibid.*, 394.) However, Milbank also wants to distance himself from Girard. Milbank’s reservation about

Girard's inclination to deal with Jesus rather than the church, says Rowan Williams, thus fails to say enough about the 'idiom' of the peace adumbrated by the preaching and death of Jesus. Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 321. To Milbank, "Girard represents the temptation (to be resisted) of conceding to science the right to explain in order to receive back from science "a demonstration of Christocentricity." Milbank, "Stories of Sacrifice," *Modern Theology* 12 (January 1996): 51. Milbank sees Girard's stance as positive scientism, whereby the superior character of the Biblical narrative is axiomatically "proved." Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 207. Girard has recently said that "Until now the order of discovery for me has been mimetic desire, archaic religion and culture, and finally the Christian text. It should be possible, especially for the Christian scholar, to reverse this order and analyze myth and culture from the standpoint of the Gospels. . . . The sequence leading up to Things Hidden, which is true, in part, to my own creative experience, gives the erroneous view of a theoretical movement from mimesis to myth, whereas in fact, a more fundamental understanding goes in the opposite direction." René Girard, "The Anthropology of the Cross: A Conversation with René Girard," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 264, 266.

¹⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 411.

¹⁸ Fergus Kerr, "Simplicity Itself: Milbank's Thesis," 307.

¹⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 363. See chapter 11 for the long treatment of MacIntyre's virtue ethics.

²⁰ John Milbank, "Enclaves, or Where is the Church?" *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 342.

²¹ Milbank, "Enclaves," 348.

²² Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 321.

²³ Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 179.

²⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 390-398. Milbank poignantly poses the question another way: "Can we take again Augustine's step beyond the Manichees, can we conceive an alternative that is a real social practice, a transmission of desire that is (despite the overlaps of power) still faintly traceable as a pure persuasion without violence?" (321)

²⁵ Graham Ward, "John Milbank's Divina Commedia," *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 314.

²⁶ Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 207.

²⁷ See Ward, "John Milbank's Divina Commedia," 317, 318 for a series of questions such as these, clustered around the question of violence.

²⁸ Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" 354-58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 362. Rowan Williams suggests that Milbank's use of the term 'violence' is "loaded and vague." Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 322.

³⁰ Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank," *Modern Theology* 10 (April 1994): 135.

³¹ Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" 357.

³² Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 323.

³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁴ Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference," 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 320.

³⁷ For one example of how the exercise of power without attendant violence might be construed, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). See especially the chapter entitled “The Power of the Lamb.”

³⁸ Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (April 1991): 226.

³⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 409.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 411. Milbank is again referring to Augustine.

⁴¹ Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 358.

⁴² L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 146.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Jones’ book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, is an extended treatment calling the church to learn the craft of forgiveness. Jones has also received criticism for not being specific enough about how embodied forgiveness would actually look.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 195.

⁴⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 418.

⁴⁶ Milbank, “Enclaves, or Where is the Church?” 349. “The heavenly city meant for Augustine a substantial peace, but this peace could also be imperfectly present in the fallen world, in the sequences of time, and time redeemed through memory”: Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 229.

⁴⁷ Milbank, “Enclaves,” 349.

⁴⁸ Milbank, “‘Between purgation and illumination’: a critique of the theology of right,” *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

⁴⁹ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Word Made Speculative? John Milbank’s Christological Poetics,” Unpublished review essay, 1998. Bauerschmidt asks whether the ‘Word made strange’ does not eclipse the Word made flesh. He also wonders whether Milbank presents a case of the “philosophical tail wagging the theological dog.” To put it another way, “Milbank presents us with a postmodern philosophy tricked out in theological language” (20).

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 198.

⁵¹ I want to acknowledge the input of my colleagues, Paul Krahn and Steve Ratzlaff, for their helpful comments. Our ongoing discussions on René Girard have been very fruitful. Thanks also to Harry Huebner for his input.

Fleeing Babylon: Menno's True Church in a Corrupt World

Earl Zimmerman

Menno Simons, the sixteenth-century ex-Catholic priest and fugitive Anabaptist leader from Friesland, hammered out his ecclesiology in an impossible situation. His understanding of the church in relation to society was shaped on the run as he sought to provide leadership to his scattered Anabaptist congregations in a bitterly hostile world. In this situation, he drew a sharp distinction between his suffering flock, depicted as the “true” church, and a “corrupt” society, depicted as the whore of Babylon.

This true church of the redeemed in Christ was bounded by believers baptism signifying a new birth and renunciation of the world, by a penitent Lord's Supper in which scripture functioned as the mirror of spiritual and ethical self-examination, and by church discipline in which the purity of the church was protected by excommunication or the ban rather than by the violent suppression of heretics. This true church walked the narrow path of suffering by rejecting both the options of revolutionary violence and of brutal establishment control. It guarded against a world-denying subjectivism and spiritualism which sought to escape suffering. And it rejoiced in the imagery of the pure church as the bride of Christ without “spot or wrinkle.”

This vision of the church in society can still be recognized by those who are Menno's spiritual heirs – at least in some form – in our own churches. It is more difficult for us to imagine, let alone understand, the sixteenth-century social and religious climate in which Menno and his Anabaptist congregations developed this ecclesiology. Yet we must make the effort to do so. Such understanding involves not only a comprehension of Menno's social and religious situation; we must also relate it to our own contemporary situation. The meeting of our worlds will take place as we seek to critically reappropriate Menno's vision of the church in society in relation to our contemporary world.

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The apocalyptic and revolutionary situation

The sixteenth century was a time of social change and unrest in the Netherlands. Charles V, the king of Spain, ruled with an iron hand, armies continually moved across the land, and there were various floods and plagues. The peasants were near revolt, and things quickly took on apocalyptic dimensions.¹ It all came to a head when a revolutionary group of disgruntled artisans and followers of the apocalyptic Anabaptist preacher Melchior Hoffman took control of the city of Münster early in 1534. The city was seen as an ark of refuge in which they would remain secure until the imminent day of God's wrath. When the armed forces under the Bishop of Münster, whom they believed to be the "Imperial Dragon," joined in the siege of the city, it was a clear apocalyptic sign foreshadowing the Kingdom of Christ. They proclaimed with confidence that as soon as the inhabitants of the city reached 144,000 – the number of the elect in the book of Revelation – they would go on a universal offensive and stamp out the entire Babylonian power and godless establishment.²

A year later the triumphant mood had changed in the besieged city. After their leader Jan Matthijs was killed, a new leader, Jan of Leyden, set himself up as the new King David and proclaimed Münster to be the new Jerusalem. The city was completely blockaded and its hungry inhabitants were seeking to escape. King Jan was promising deliverance by Easter, March 28, 1535, and was trying to summon the courage to move out with his wagon fortresses to join the faithful in the Netherlands. Agents were despatched to raise up new centers of resistance to give his desperate plan some hope of success.³

That Easter day was not only when Jan of Leyden was promising deliverance for his besieged city. It was also when the Sacramentarians of the Netherlands (those who rejected the outward sacrament of the mass and emphasized Christ's spiritual presence)⁴ were subjected to the annual indignity of their obligatory mass. About three hundred of them were gathered at the village of Tzum because they did not want to attend mass. They were attacked by the stadtholder's soldiers but were surprisingly able to defend themselves. They then barricaded themselves in the nearby Cistercian abbey of Oldeklooster. The stadtholder quickly moved against them with two hundred foot soldiers but was again repulsed. The group was able to send out a call to those who "value the Gospel and love God" to come and help them.⁵

Afraid of a general uprising in the province the Frisian authorities, immediately laid siege to the cloister and brought in more soldiers and cannons for a full scale assault. On April 7 they attacked and, after fierce fighting, captured the abbey by nightfall. Conservative estimates are that about one hundred soldiers were killed. Most of the group of three hundred or more inside the cloister were either killed in the fighting or summarily executed; a few were able to escape and some youth were spared because of their age. Menno Simon's brother was part of the Oldeklooster group and lost his life there.⁶ Menno was serving as priest in the nearby parish of Witmarsum at the time and could easily have heard the explosions of the cannons as the assault dragged on throughout the day.⁷

These events intensified Menno's struggles of conscience and were pivotal to his eventual decision to serve as a leader of the scattered Anabaptist groups. They help us understand both his deep sense of alienation from society, including any form of established Christianity, and his vision of the "true" reconstituted suffering church on the pattern of early Christianity which he saw embodied in the scattered groups of Dutch Anabaptists. The difficult question here is how Menno's ecclesiology with its sharp distinction between the suffering church and an evil world relates to us and our own experience of church and society.

Menno's conversion

The other issue Menno struggled with was the prevailing sixteenth-century one of where personal salvation is found. For him it involved a growing crisis of faith in the Catholic sacramental system as he knew and practiced it. What we know about Menno's personal background and his struggle in this regard is found in two of his writings. One is a tract he published in 1537 titled "Meditation on the Twenty-fifth Psalm," written in the form of a personal confession. Another is Menno's later account of his conversion and renunciation of Roman Catholicism in "Reply to Gellius Faber," published in 1554. In the former, written during his early difficult years in hiding, Menno displayed a fundamental opposition between church and world. In reference to his previous life as a priest, he said:

Empty talk, vanity, playing [cards], drinking, eating were my daily pastime. The fear of God was not before my eyes. Moreover, I

was a lord and a prince in Babylon. Everyone sought me and desired me. The world loved me and I it.⁸

But Menno's lot as the despised and hunted Anabaptist leader was completely different:

But as soon as I . . . esteemed all as nothingness, as soon as I renounced the proud ungodliness of this world and sought Thee and Thy kingdom which will abide forever, then I found everywhere the counterpart and reverse. . . . Once I was a friend, now I pass for an enemy. Then I was considered wise, now a fool. Then pious, now wicked; then a Christian, now a heretic, yes, an abomination and an evildoer to all.⁹

Menno continued this meditation with a lament and plea to God for mercy and guidance:

O Lord, comfort me, preserve Thy sorrowful servant, for I am exceedingly poor and wretched. My sins rise up against me, the world hates and reviles me; lords and princes persecute me, the learned ones curse and abuse me, my dearest friends forsake me, and those who were near to me stand afar. Who will have mercy on me and receive me? Miserable am I, dear Lord. Have mercy on me and receive me with honor. . . . Lead me in the right way lest I stumble upon the dark mountains.¹⁰

In his "Reply to Gellius Faber," written years later, Menno gave a personal account of his reasons for becoming an Anabaptist. He had assumed his priestly duties in 1524 in the village of Pingjum. He claims he had little knowledge of the Bible and was afraid to read it.¹¹ Persistent questions, however, about the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Mass and about infant baptism eventually drove him to read the scriptures to find answers. He was also reading Luther's writings, which gave him the confidence to trust scriptural authority rather than church tradition. He further consulted the church fathers and the writings of various church reformers, only to find out that none of them agreed with each other. He soon became convinced that he had been deceived about both the Mass and infant baptism. But he equivocated on these matters and did not take a clear stand.¹²

In the meantime Menno was given his own parish in his hometown of Witmarsum, where he became a popular preacher. There, he recalls, people said he “preached the Word of God and was a good fellow.”¹³ Things became more complicated when the apocalyptic followers of Melchior Hoffman became active in the region; Menno himself participated in a Melchiorite conventicle. Things quickly reached a critical point for him when people in the local Melchiorite groups became involved with John of Leiden and the violent politics of Münster.¹⁴

Menno’s religious quest and the social questions surrounding Münster became intertwined. Menno soon made a name for himself in his ability to argue against and silence the Münsterites.¹⁵ His earliest known writing is a strong polemic against them titled “The Blasphemy of John of Leiden,” which was apparently written shortly before or around the time of the fighting at Oldeklooster. In this strong repudiation of the revolutionary tactics of Münster, he argued that “Christ has not taken his kingdom with the sword, but he entered it through much suffering. Yet they think to take it by the sword!”¹⁶

Menno’s relationship with revolutionary Anabaptism was ambiguous. In later years, he remained silent about exactly when he joined the Anabaptists and was vague about his connections with the Melchior Hoffman and the Melchiorites. There was a definite connection through the brothers Obbe and Dirk Phillips, who later appointed him as an Anabaptist elder, and through an Melchiorite circle in Witmarsum that he was part of. In any case, it was the debacle at Münster that turned him against this form of Anabaptism. Throughout the rest of his life he continued fighting the extreme apocalyptic and spiritualist tendencies within Anabaptism.

But Menno says his conscience did not stop troubling him. Everybody leaned on him to refute the Münsterites even though they were impenitent in their own lives. He was greatly troubled by “the poor straying sheep who wandering as sheep without a proper shepherd after many cruel edicts, garrotings, and slaughters” as a consequence of the terrible event at Oldeklooster. He writes:

After this had transpired the blood of these poor people, although misled, fell so hot on my heart that I could not stand it, nor find rest in my soul. I reflected upon my unclean, carnal life, also the hypocritical doctrine and idolatry which I still practiced daily in

appearance of godliness, but without relish. I saw that these zealous children, although in error, willingly gave their lives and their estates for their doctrine and faith. And I was one of those who had disclosed to some of them the abominations of the papal system. But I myself was continuing in my comfortable life and acknowledged abominations simply in order that I might enjoy physical comfort and escape the cross of Christ.¹⁷

After this Menno says, “I began in the name of the Lord to preach publicly from the pulpit the word of true repentance, to point people to the narrow path, and the power of Scripture. . . .”¹⁸ Reading between the lines, we can assume that he was soon in danger of being apprehended himself. Nine months later, in January 1536, he left his parish at Witmarsum and went underground. Menno was approached by some leaders of the scattered peaceful Anabaptist groups in the Netherlands who convinced him to take a position of leadership. After much soul searching he submitted himself to this call by a people who, he said, “led a penitent life in the fear of God.”¹⁹ He writes:

And so I, a miserable sinner, was enlightened of the Lord, was converted to a new mind, fled from Babel, entered into Jerusalem, and finally, though unworthy, was called to His high and heavy service.²⁰

As we have seen, Menno's final break with Roman Catholicism was in response to his new-found conviction that he had been deceived about questions of personal salvation and the role of the church in society. On the question of personal salvation, he rejected the sacramental system as he knew it. He replaced it with the Anabaptist understanding of an inner, spiritual conversion to Christ, symbolized by believers baptism and a penitent Lord's Supper preceded by self-examination. On the question of the role of the church in society, Menno rejected revolutionary Anabaptism but also positioned himself against any form of established religion, whether Catholic or Protestant. For him the “true church” would always be a suffering “little flock” that rejected these two “violent” options. The path of true penitence and discipleship would be found by walking in this narrow way.

The church of Christ and the church of Antichrist

While Menno was adamantly opposed to the revolutionary program of the Münsterites, he did share their negative assessment of the social and religious establishment of his day: it was completely corrupt and demonic. The debacle at Oldeklooster seems to have been permanently impressed on his mind and became the lens through which he saw the whole world. The social and religious order was Antichrist, and the true church could have nothing to do with this corrupt establishment. This perception fits Anabaptist scholar George H. Williams's observation of Anabaptists in general. According to him, the Anabaptist rank and file were people who had been culturally and socially disenfranchised for generations and never admitted into the civilized life of Europe. They were the "poor ones," as Menno often called his flock. In this respect they were not changing their cultural and religious identity – they were gaining it for the first time.²¹

Such a dichotomy between church and world was foundational to Menno's theology. We need to distinguish it from the dualism of the material and the spiritual that was common in the sixteenth century and also present in Menno's thought. Cornelis Augustijn, a historian and Erasmus scholar at the Free University of Amsterdam, sees the dualism of the material and the spiritual in Menno as reflective of his dependence on Erasmus who, Augustijn believes, shaped Menno's theology and way of being Christian more than any other sixteenth-century theologian.²² While Menno did at times associate evil with the material and the creaturely, and the good with the spiritual, it is a mistake to understand him as a spiritualist. His theology of the church making Christ present in the world kept him from arriving at such a conclusion. For him the true church was visible in the world. In response to Reformed pastor Gellius Faber's assertion that the true church was invisible, he wrote:

I know of a certainty that it cannot fail, that where the true church of Christ is, there she will be made manifest among this wicked and perverse generation by words and work, for she can as little be hid as a city upon a hill, or a candle upon a candlestick.²³

While Menno had strong disagreements with Protestant reformers like Faber and John à Lasco over such issues as infant baptism and Christ's incarnation, the biggest difference between them was ecclesiological. This

seems to have been the main obstacle to their ability to work together in spite of various conversations where they tried to reach a common understanding. Menno laid down the difference between “the true signs by which the church of Christ can be known” and “the true signs by which the church of Antichrist can be known.” The church of Christ was known “by an unadulterated pure doctrine, by a scriptural use of sacramental signs, by obedience to the word, by unfeigned brotherly love, by a bold confession of God and Christ,” and “by oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord’s word.” The church of Antichrist is known “by a frivolous, easy and false doctrine, by an unscriptural use of the sacramental signs as infant baptism and the impenitent supper, by disobedience to the word, by hatred of the brethren, by hypocrisy and denial of the name of God and Christ,” and “by tyranny and persecution against the godly.”²⁴

According to Menno, the problem with the false churches was that they were not separated from the world. They taught wrong doctrine, failed to observe ceremonies commanded in Scripture or added other ceremonies, and their members lived impenitent, worldly lives. Menno regarded all who differed with his concept of the church as sects. The Roman Catholics and the major Protestant groups were the *Groote Secten* (large sects) and the small spiritualist groups that tended to deny aspects of classical Christian orthodoxy were the *Verdorven Secten* (corrupt sects). His attitude toward both became increasingly severe with the passing years.²⁵

Menno’s judgment of all society was equally severe. In the rulers he found “nothing but haughtiness and pride, nothing but pomp and vaunting, dancing and leaping, harloting, riding and hunting, lancing and fighting, warring, devastating cities and lands, and living to their heart’s desire.”²⁶ Similar lists were included for every social grouping. Judges were avaricious and accepted bribes; preachers, priests and monks were lazy and wanton; the common people gambled, drank and fought. Menno concluded:

I testify the truth in Christ Jesus, take heed if you will; Jesus Christ did not from the beginning tolerate such open impenitent, carnal sinners in His holy city, kingdom and church. Nor will He ever endure them, this you may believe.²⁷

In contrast, the true church was formed by people who had been baptized in the Spirit and lived penitent and pious lives. They were children of

peace who did not know war. The right practice of scriptural doctrine and church order separated them from the folly of the world. For Menno this practice was simple. It involved: (1) Scriptural baptism after repentance and on the confession of faith; (2) the Lord's Supper observed as a penitent Supper preceded by personal and communal examination; (3) the ban, which assured that the church would remain true and faithful. Menno kept reiterating these three points throughout his writings.²⁸

Menno's favorite image for the church was the bridal imagery taken from the Song of Songs and other scriptural references. Because the church was the "bride of Christ," her children were begotten by the seed of the divine and human bridegroom through the new birth and new creation in Christ. The church "without spot or wrinkle" was formed by partaking in Christ's sinless flesh. While Menno maintained that Christians were always weak and prone to sin, he nevertheless urged them to strive to elevate the spirit over "sinful flesh."²⁹

The last section of Menno's primary work, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," contains a beautiful section on the church, in which he rejoices in this bridal imagery.³⁰ Such imagery is sprinkled throughout his writings, sometimes with passionate and erotic language:

Therefore He kisses them as His beloved chosen ones, with the mouth of His peace, and calls them His church, His bride, flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone, of which He begets with inexpressible pleasure by His powerful seed, His holy Word, the children of God, the children of promise, the children of righteousness, the children of truth, and the children of eternal life.³¹

In summary, a sharp distinction between the true church and a corrupt world was central to Menno's ecclesiology. Churches that compromised in their relationship to this corrupt world were characterized as the church of Antichrist. Menno's own church of the "poor ones" separated herself from the world and willingly embraced the way of penitence and suffering. But this way of suffering included rich spiritual blessings associated with being the true bride of Christ without spot or wrinkle.

The penitent Supper

Strict separation from the world was closely tied to Menno's understanding of church rituals. We can see this readily in his theology of the Lord's Supper. As can be surmised by his doubts about Christ's physical presence in the sacramental elements, Menno chastised Roman Catholics for teaching the physical presence of Christ in the sacramental elements of the mass. He argued that they had made the "holy supper" into the actual flesh and the actual blood of Christ. With his familiar rhetorical flair he exclaimed, "Oh, unheard of heresy!"³² He recruited Augustine in support of his argument against such heresy:

Therefore I say once more, He cannot be masticated nor digested in the body of any man. This thing Augustine plainly acknowledges, saying, "Why do you make ready teeth and stomach? Merely believe, and you have 'eaten' him already!" We know right well, dear reader, that Augustine did not write this of the outward eating of the Holy Supper, but of the inward eating that takes place in the spirit by faith.³³

Anabaptist scholar and Mennonite pastor John Rempel says the Anabaptists uniformly understood pre-Tridentine Catholic eucharistic doctrine as vulgar, mechanical materialism, but believes they misunderstood of the Catholic position.³⁴ Nevertheless, such was apparently the prevailing understanding in the communities that gave rise to Anabaptism. While still a priest Menno believed this to be the case, and it contributed to the crisis of conscience that led him to leave the priesthood.³⁵

While Menno saw himself as standing against both the Catholic and Protestant positions, he shared the trend toward subjectivism within Protestantism. Rempel argues that this tendency was furthered by various factors that altered the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper in the late middle ages and the sixteenth century. One was the increasing infrequency of receiving communion by the common people. Though the mass was celebrated each week, many partook only once a year and then with great dread of unworthy reception of the blood and body of Christ. This led to the practice of adoring the sacrament from a distance instead of receiving it, and contributed to an emphasis on the spiritual communion with Christ above the sacramental

one. Such an emphasis was clearly evident in the Sacramentarian movement that was often a precursor to Anabaptism in the Netherlands.³⁶

The movement toward individualism and subjectivism was arrested within Anabaptism by the insistence that the church was the visible body of Christ in relation to the world. While the direct priestly mediation of the sacraments was rejected, the Lord's Supper was nevertheless celebrated within the confines of the gathered community, which was the agent of communion presided over by its ordained ministers. This contributed a strong communal and ethical dimension to faith. Christ, in his humanity, was believed to be present in the church as an extension of his incarnation. The church was in this sense the human body of Christ. In their theology of suffering and martyrdom, Anabaptists believed they were giving their bodies and blood for their neighbors as Christ had given his for them.

Drawing on images of communion that were common in the early church fathers, the Anabaptists often used the image of many grains of wheat making one loaf.³⁷ Menno wrote:

Just as natural bread is made of many grains, pulverized by the mill, kneaded with water, and baked by the heat of the fire, so is the church of Christ made up of true believers, broken in their hearts with the mill of the divine Word, baptized with the water of the Holy Ghost, and with the fire of pure, unfeigned love made into one body.³⁸

The Lord's Supper was understood as the outward sign of this inward, spiritual communion of the whole body of Christ with her members and with her Lord. Menno called it a "communion of the body and blood of Christ." Hence, it was necessary for one to examine oneself to make certain that:

You have been made partakers of Christ: whether indeed you are flesh of his flesh and bone of His bone; whether you are in Christ and Christ is in you. For all who eat of this bread and drink of this cup worthily must be changed in the inner man, and converted and renewed in their minds through the power of the divine Word.³⁹

Where the Lord's Supper is celebrated in this way, preceded by self-examination and a penitent heart, Christ is present. Menno wrote:

For wherever this Holy Supper is celebrated with such faith, love, attentiveness, peace, unity of heart and mind, there Jesus Christ is present with his grace, Spirit, and promise, and with the merits of His sufferings, misery, flesh, blood, cross, and death even as He Himself says: Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. . . . But where the true knowledge of Christ, active faith, new life, Christian love, peace, and unity do not exist, there is not the Lord's Supper, but a despising and mocking of the blood and death of Christ occurs; an encouragement for the impenitent, a seductive hypocrisy, a patent blasphemy and idolatry, as alas, we know and see in the world.⁴⁰

Building on his beloved bridal imagery and his sharp distinction between the "true church" and the "church of Antichrist," Menno, in his practiced polemical style, delights in the mystery of this paschal union with Christ:

Oh, delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast to which the impenitent and proud despisers are, according to Scripture, not invited: the harlots, rogues, adulterers, seducers, robbers, liars, defrauders, tyrants, shedders of blood, idolaters, slanderers, etc., for such are not the people of the Lord. But they are invited who are born of God, true Christians who have buried their sins, and who walk with Christ in a new and godly life. They are invited who crucify the flesh and are driven by the Holy Spirit; who sincerely believe in God, seek, fear, and love Him, and in their weakness willingly serve and obey Him, for they are members of His body, flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone.⁴¹

Some scholars see a continuation of traditional medieval piety in Menno's theology of "true penitence." While his penitential practice was shaped by his newly discovered scriptural norms, it nevertheless continued to stress God's law and a salutary fear of the Lord as the path to righteousness. In contrast to Luther's justification *sola fide*, Menno insisted that faith without obedience and fruits is not true faith, and that human free will must cooperate with God's grace in achieving salvation. He insisted on a real, albeit incomplete, freeing of the believer from the corruption of the flesh.⁴²

The penitent and reborn church would flee Babylon, the so-called Christian world that did not bear the fruits of true penitence and would soon perish under the wrath of God. Such penitence was not the merely outward practices of penance, such as “hypocritical fastings and pilgrimages,” or of frequent “masses and confessionals.” Instead, Menno insisted on a biblical “penitence of power and works” as taught by John the Baptist. It was “to die unto sin, and all ungodly works, and to live no longer according to the lusts of the flesh.”⁴³

Again we see the integral relationship between conversion, ritual practice, and the church’s relationship with society. As much as the language of spiritual conversion and of fleeing Babylon may seem to suggest otherwise, Menno’s theology was not world denying. The true church was visible and present in the world, and its ritual practice had a strong ethical component that used scripture as its penitential mirror. The true church must really wrestle with how to be faithful in its social context, corrupt as that context was deemed to be.

Reappropriating a radical tradition

It is difficult for us even to understand the world of this sixteenth-century Frisian priest and the situation that led to the radical and sacrificial choices he made, let alone to try to understand what it means for us in our world. If we bring our own questions, Menno will not answer them – at least not on our terms. We cannot study Menno without being powerfully impressed by the social and religious turmoil of sixteenth-century Europe, with all its pain and suffering. It is indeed an irony of history that many of our twentieth-century confessional loyalties within the Christian community have their roots in that tumultuous situation. At the least, we should approach with great humility the differences that grew out of such turmoil. When we read Menno from the perspective of our own century, we may wish we could turn back the centuries and soften his polemics. But this may only indicate how difficult it is for us to enter his world and understand his passion. He was, after all, an apocalyptic preacher, with a holy zeal for reconstituting the true church that followed Christ in all of life. Such zeal frightens us.

Our fear may say more about ourselves and our relationship with contemporary society than about Menno and the sixteenth century. Let’s be

honest: those of us who are spiritual heirs of Menno and the Anabaptists are basically at home in our world. Even our more traditional church communities which, despite various external lines of demarcation such as dress and non-participation in certain vices, generally share the business, political, and social mores of our society. We are hardly radicals or revolutionaries. Indications of how much we are at home include how we vote in elections, how we invest our money, what kinds of possessions we own, and how integrally we participate in our society's professional and business life.

Our relationship with contemporary society is, however, more complex than this picture indicates. My experience as a pastor and a teacher reminds me how passionately many of us want to follow Christ in a way that both affirms what is good and challenges what is evil or oppressive. Our sacrificial involvement in the life of our churches, in service and mission programs, as well as in various arenas of social activism underscores this desire. We are regularly faced with stark choices between following Christ's way of peace and our government's use of violence to achieve its objectives. In this respect we can affirm and reappropriate Menno's conviction that the church is not coterminous with society. Menno argued that such an established church is "caesaropapist" and beholden to the magistracy:

Where the papists stick with the papists, Lutherans with the Lutherans . . . etc., now build up, and anon demolish and act the hypocrite in keeping with the magistracy's wishes, everyone who is enlightened by the truth and taught by the Spirit may judge what kind of church that is.⁴⁴

In Menno's ecclesiology the church is primary and distinct from society. In keeping with this understanding, Menno argued for religious freedom using the parable of the wheat and the tares. The field is the world, and God will make the final judgment between the wheat and tares. God does not want the tares torn up before their time lest the wheat also be torn up. Christians are the wheat, and it is not their task to bring in the harvest or separate the wheat from the tares. In relation to his own situation Menno laments, "Oh, what noble wheat they destroy!"⁴⁵

The situation of persecution surely must have powerfully influenced Menno's judgment that society as he knew it was thoroughly corrupt along with the churches that served to legitimate it. Menno had a rather monolithic

understanding of society: sixteenth-century society indeed was monolithic compared to our own pluralistic and democratic societies. Yet we can only wish that his understanding of society had not been so monolithic, nor his judgment of it as condemning as his metaphor of “fleeing Babylon” or his lists of vices negatively characterizing people in all levels of society would indicate. But we should not be too critical. We have not heard the cannons at Oldeklooster, nor lost a brother whose only mistake, as Menno said, was that he defended his faith with his fist.

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder indicates that the church is a sociological unit distinguishable from the rest of the society. As such, it is discriminating in what it accepts or rejects within a given social or cultural milieu. Some elements, such as tyranny, overt violence, and cultic idolatry, are categorically rejected. Other dimensions, such as economic production, commerce, and the graphic arts, are accepted within clear limits. Still other dimensions, such as agriculture, family life, literacy, and conflict resolution, are given a new coherence through Christian faith.⁴⁶ Surely we should include such discrimination in our reappropriation of Menno, without our losing his passionate denunciation of that which is corrupt and evil.

The very struggle of Anabaptist communities to find their own space within sixteenth-century society, along with the conviction that being Christian involved communal discernment about practical ethical matters, implies the kind of discrimination Yoder advocates. It can be argued that this is a contribution these communities made to Western society in general. Such discrimination insists on bringing moral issues related to the common good into the public sphere, issues which other Reformation traditions and modern liberal theories have relegated to private morality. Indeed social theorist Jürgen Habermas asks what difference it would have made to practical morality in society if this radical communitarian wing of the Reformation had not been so brutally marginalized.⁴⁷

When we turn our attention to the internal life of the church, the most significant thing we can learn from Menno is his passion for his scattered congregations and their Christian life in community. He had a deep pastoral and theological concern for those local churches. This was the primary source of contention, indeed the breaking point between him and the Protestant reformers. He insisted that the local church was visible in the world, formed

around the visible signs of believer's baptism, spoken word, penitent supper, and church discipline, with the final recourse of the ban that sought to bring back the erring brother or sister in love.

Langdon Gilkey has noted that churches which are generally characterized as *sect-type* have demarcated the entire church community as holy and separated from the larger society. The community's internal life is regulated by an absolute ethic derived from biblical sources. This is in contrast to *church-type* churches, where specific aspects of church life such as the sacraments, doctrine, and the clergy are demarcated as holy. Ordinary members relate to the holy, not so much by saintliness, as by participation in the activity of the great church.⁴⁸

Menno and his congregations fit the sect-type characterization in their insistence that the faithful community itself is separated and holy. One disclaimer, however, is in order. Gilkey depicts the sect-type as devaluing sacrament and doctrine in preference to the redeemed and separated community as the locus of the holy. This was not necessarily true for Menno. His insistence on the inner spiritual dimension of conversion, for which the sacraments served as external symbols, was actually an intensification of their significance for Christian piety. His reconstituted true biblical doctrine functioned in much the same way.⁴⁹

The significance of Gilkey's distinction is his penetrating analysis of what happens in the North American denominational process. Denominations are a hybrid of both the sect-type and the church-type. As such, they are in danger of losing the transcendental dimension that separates them from North American society. When the sect-type becomes another community church, completely at home in its world, it loses its separated communal, moral, and intellectual life. The denomination also has a severely weakened embodiment of the sacred as mediated by the sacraments, dogma, and the clergy which formerly characterized the church-type.⁵⁰

For those of us who are Menno's spiritual heirs, this problem suggests, as John Howard Yoder has indicated, the need for continued communal discernment and discrimination in relation to our social milieu. Failing to act on this need is the greatest spiritual danger facing our churches. We must keep in mind how the shared life of our church communities is expressed through our gathered worship and liturgical practice. The recent interest in liturgical renewal

in many of our churches is responding to a deeply felt desire to more adequately express this dimension. All of this together indicates the continued need for church discipline related to theological reflection, doctrinal formulation, and pastoral oversight.

What is at stake for us is what was at stake for Menno and his churches – the life of Christ in the church. Menno protected and fought for this cause with a jealous zeal. But unfortunately he possessed a trait common to many other sixteenth-century reformers: he had little concern for the unity of the universal church. Especially in his later years, he was too ready to fracture relations, even with other Anabaptist church communities. Sadly, from the very beginning this factious tendency has too often characterized the church communities Menno helped create. This negative ecclesiology, while perhaps understandable in his own oppressive sixteenth-century context, must finally be judged as deficient and schismatic. Such schismatic tendencies are even less excusable in our day, even when their purported reason is to protect the holiness of the church. They reflect a spirit that fails to recognize the incomplete and sinful nature of all church communities (including our own) as well as and the power of God’s recreating Spirit among us.

On a happier note, Menno brings us the reality of the blessed community as the body of Christ sacrificially offering itself for the world. It is this grace that the church tradition which traces its roots to Menno has embodied, even if imperfectly. It is beautifully expressed in the eucharistic tradition of many grains of wheat being pressed together to make one loaf. In our less troubled and contentious age, we rejoice with Menno in his blessed church as the bride of Christ, and in her delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast:

Oh, delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast . . . where the hungry consciences are fed with the heavenly bread of the divine Word, with the wine of the Holy Ghost, and where the peaceful, joyous souls sing and play before the Lord.⁵¹

Notes

¹ For background on the revolutionary situation in the Netherlands see James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1972), 206-7. See also Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), 101. For a more extensive background on the social, political, and religious climate of the low countries in the sixteenth century see Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life and Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 1-79.

² James M. Stayer, "Oldeklooster and Menno," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, 1 (1978): 51.

³ For more details on apocalyptic, revolutionary Anabaptism and the situation in Münster, see Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 211-80. See also Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism*, 80-164.

⁴ Already in 1527 a woman had been burned at the stake for denying the physical presence of Christ in the sacraments. See T. J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 1019.

⁵ Stayer, "Oldeklooster," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 53-54.

⁶ Gellius Faber, the Reformed pastor at Emden, later accused Menno of having a brother who died as a violent Münsterite. Menno acknowledged as much when he wrote in response to Faber, "Alas my poor brother, whom he so hatefully brings up, did no greater wrong than that he erroneously, alas, defended his faith with his fist and met the violence committed, just as all the learned ones, preachers, priests, monks, and all the world do." See Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger and trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956; rpt. 1984), 774-75, hereafter CW. For the historical evidence that Menno's brother died at Oldeklooster, see Sjouke Voolstra, *Menno Simons: His Image and Message* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1997), 88, n.13.

⁷ Stayer, "Oldeklooster," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 54-55.

⁸ CW, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Menno's disparaging remarks about his poor education should not be taken too literally. While he always wrote in a popular and biblicist style, he was a formidable theological debater and polemicist. He was familiar with the church fathers and some ancient Greek writers through the work of Erasmus and Sebastian Franck. He had great respect for Erasmus and always quoted him positively. His educational background has been a matter of debate. George Epp makes an extensive argument that Menno had a monastical education with the Premonstratensian Order. See George K. Epp, "The Premonstratensian Connection of Menno Simons: Confirmations, Revisions and New Evidence," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 62 (July 1988): 349-55. Sjouke Voolstra thinks it is more probable that Menno, as a secular priest, received his education in a Latin school because the secular clergy had no educational institution of its own in Friesland. See Voolstra, *Menno Simons*, 61, n. 3. and "Themes in the Early Theology of Menno Simons" in *Menno Simons: A Reappraisal*, ed. Gerald R. Brunk (Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite College, 1992), 38-39. For Menno's dependence on Erasmus see Cornelis Augustijn, "Erasmus and Menno," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* [hereafter *MQR*] 60 (October 1986), 497-508.

¹² CW, 668-69.

¹³ CW, 668.

¹⁴ For an account of Menno's first contacts with Anabaptism, see Voolstra, *Menno Simons*, 82-91.

¹⁵ This was the occasion of his first writing, "The Blasphemy of John of Leiden."

¹⁶ CW, 49.

¹⁷ CW, 670.

¹⁸ CW, 671.

¹⁹ CW, 672.

²⁰ CW.

²¹ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 848. See also John R. Loeschen, *The Divine Community: Trinity, Church, and Ethics in Reformation Theologies* (Kirksville: The Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1981), 110.

²² Augustijn, "Erasmus and Menno," *MQR* 60, 506.

²³ CW, 747.

²⁴ CW, 743-44.

²⁵ William E. Keeney, *The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice From 1539-1564* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graff, 1968), 147.

²⁶ CW, 98.

²⁷ CW, 99.

²⁸ CW, 99. When the Anabaptist conference in Strasbourg in 1557 reprimanded Menno for his harshness in church discipline, his response was very intransigent. By this time he was an old, sick man. He had outlived his time and died in 1561. See Harold Bender, "A Brief Bibliography of Menno Simons," CW, 27 and Menno's "Instruction on Excommunication" and "Reply to Syllis and Lemke" in CW, 961-1015.

²⁹ Menno's perfectionism can be partially attributed to his faulty understanding of human procreation. He understood the male seed to be the active agent in procreation whereas the female womb was a "fertile field" that did not contribute actively to the flesh of the child. Thus, while Christ was born of Mary, he did not partake in Mary's sinful flesh. While Menno did not deny that Christ was human, he argued that he had "pure celestial flesh." This became controversial within the Anabaptist movement and Menno's Protestant adversaries continually accused him of heresy. See Sjouke Voolstra, "The Word Has Become Flesh: The Melchiorite-Mennonite Teaching on the Incarnation," *MQR* 57 (April 1983), 158. For an excellent article on how bridal imagery controls Menno's understanding of the church, see Beth Kreitzer, "Menno Simons and the Bride of Christ," *MQR* 70 (July 1996): 299-318.

³⁰ CW, 221-24.

³¹ CW, 410.

³² CW, 153.

³³ CW, 155.

³⁴ John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck and Dirk Philips* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1993), 26-27.

³⁵ In early sixteenth-century Frisian society, the tangible presence of the divine was understood to be magically present in the communion host. It was this belief that increasingly came into question for many Frisian people. See Voolstra, *Menno Simons*, 59-62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³⁷ Cyprian speaks of the communion fellowship in these terms: "As many grains, collected, and ground, and mixed together into one mass, make one bread; so in Christ, who is the heavenly bread, we may know that there is one body, with which our number is joined and united." As quoted in James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 242.

³⁸ CW, 145.

³⁹ CW, 146.

⁴⁰ CW, 148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sjouke Voolstra, "True Penitence: The Core of Menno Simons' Theology," *MQR* 62 (July 1988), 387-400. See also Stayer, "Oldeklooster," *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 57.

⁴³ CW, 111.

⁴⁴ CW, 741.

⁴⁵ CW, 750, 48.

⁴⁶ John Howard Yoder, How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in Stassen, Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) , 69.

⁴⁷ As referred to by José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) , 231.

⁴⁸ Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) , 4-15.

⁴⁹ Voolstra, *Menno Simons*, 62-66.

⁵⁰ Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World*, 19.

⁵¹ CW, 148.

Between Gospel and the Classics: Bridging Musical Worlds

Eric Friesen

Classical music has been my life. The music from my father's record collection is my earliest aural experience. Schubert songs, Bach cantatas, Beethoven sonatas. I have always loved classical music, from those days before I could speak even to now, working with classical music every day at the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). I love it and will always love it. It's an inexhaustible richness of music that feeds my soul every day.

But it isn't the only form of music out there, and it isn't the only kind of music I was drawn to as a kid or even now. Every one of us 'crosses over' in some way from the territory of our major musical interest to others. Sometimes we do it enthusiastically and openly. Sometimes we do it furtively, apologetically, slightly embarrassed that we might be caught listening to country music, rock-and-roll, jazz, or even . . . gospel music.

My earliest hearing of gospel music was on the main street of my home town, Altona, Manitoba, on a summer Saturday night. As the sun was setting, and the dust rising from all the young lovers cruising main street in their sleek Desotos and Chevy Impalas, a gospel quartet from the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church would set up in a strategic location directly across from the Rhineland Hotel and its infamous beer parlor. And with the Pool grain elevator and the railroad station as backdrop, the gospel quartet, with an ancient sound system mounted on the roof of an old Chevy pickup, would sing their witness to the drinkers and the lovers of a prairie summer's night. I would sit on the steps of Friesen's Stationery Store, right next to the hotel, and listen, strangely attracted to this music that was so reviled at home and in the better homes of Altona Mennonites.

Eric Friesen hosts three classical music programs for CBC Radio 2: "In Performance," "Onstage at Glenn Gould Studio," and "Great Pianists of the Twentieth Century." This essay is based on an address given at a fundraising event for the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre.

A few years later, while working at Altona's classical music radio station, CFAM, I discovered a little corner of the music library called "folk music." And on this shelf, way out of the mainstream shelving of Brahms and Mozart and Handel, I found a bunch of recordings by groups like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys, Mother Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family, and Bill Munroe. I started playing them for my own enjoyment, while keeping half an ear on the three-hour-long opera that was being broadcast on a Saturday afternoon.

To jump ahead twenty years in my life: In 1984 we moved to the United States, to Minnesota, where I worked for Minnesota Public Radio for thirteen years. One of the highlights of my time there was to hear Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion." I attended hundreds of his shows and watched as it became the most popular public radio program in the US, and Garrison himself take on the mantle of a humorist in the tradition of Mark Twain. I can't recall one single edition of the show that didn't feature at least one set of gospel music. Garrison Keillor is a very complicated, sophisticated person who has written regularly for *The New Yorker* magazine and *The New York Times*, and who has had a dozen books published, many of them bestsellers. He is also a kid who grew up in Anoka, Minnesota, in a small evangelical community known as the 'Sanctified Brethren' (in Canada known as the Plymouth Brethren). And while Garrison has long ago left that group for an on again, off again relationship with the Lutherans and the Anglicans, he is an unabashed, unashamed lover of gospel music. Many Saturday evenings he creates his own little group, which he calls the "Hopeful Gospel Quartet" and in which he sings bass. As often as not he invites some of the big names in gospel to be part of his radio show. And even with the big stars, Garrison sings bass or baritone harmony. This often mystifies the public radio audience – urban, highly-educated, non-Christian – but it is obviously so genuine, so deeply felt, that they shrug their shoulders and accept it, and in many cases secretly enjoy it. Garrison is someone who yearns for a lost, experiential spirituality, who finds in the music a legitimate connection to the revival tradition of his youth, who finds this music still speaking to him long after he has left the community of origin. And he draws to this world millions of people who listen to him every week.

You might be surprised to know that there are many connections between the worlds of classical and gospel music. I'd like to offer two examples.

One day I was backstage at Orchestral Hall in Minneapolis, when a veteran violinist from the Minnesota Orchestra, a real crusty old-timer named Herman, stopped me and asked about a work I had played on my radio program a couple of days earlier. It turned out to be the second movement of the *Mennonite Piano Concerto* by Victor Davies, in which there is a lovely theme-and-variations movement on the hymn "In the rifted rock I'm resting" (Wehrlos und Verlassen). What is the name of that hymn, Herman wanted to know. He seemed so insistent on getting the name of it. When I asked him why, he grew very quiet and told me had heard it just as he was getting in his car, having come from the doctor's office where he learned his wife was seriously ill with cancer. He told me this with tears in his eyes. This man whose life had been spent in music was touched, not by the memories of all those fantastic Beethoven symphonies he had played, but by this simple gospel hymn which Victor Davies has so beautifully incorporated into piano concerto form, yet without in any way diminishing its direct, personal, musical impact. A gospel hymn, like a Trojan horse, brought into the world of classical music – and every single time it is played, the calls and letters come in, asking how to get this CD.

The second example. In September 1999 I hosted a concert at Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto with cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He played a Bach Unaccompanied Cello Suite, and then one of the most difficult pieces in the cello repertoire, the solo sonata by Zoltan Kodaly. It is almost unplayable, fiendishly difficult, a piece Yo-Yo Ma has taken up only in the past few years. At the end of the concert, for an encore he played a solo cello version of the *Appalachia Waltz*, a tune written by the fiddle player Mark O'Connor – a slow, haunting tune from the Appalachian gospel tradition that Yo-Yo has come to love. He has made a video and a CD with O'Connor and the great Nashville bass player, Edgar Meyer; all of it music from this same tradition. Of course, when Yo-Yo Ma plays the *Appalachian Waltz*, he plays it like Jascha Heifetz plays a Gershwin standard. Yo-Yo is a classical player, but he takes this music as seriously as Bach, Beethoven, or a new piece written for him by some smart New York composer.

I'll end with a personal experience. A couple of months ago, I was walking in the Don Valley near my home in Toronto, feeling particularly low, blue . . . no, I was depressed and feeling kind of hopeless. In the midst of this walk a long-forgotten tune came into my head, and I started humming it. And then the words started coming back to me from this old gospel hymn that I know I first heard on the main street of Altona. I started singing to myself, tentatively at first, and then with real conviction and healing.

*This world is not my home,
I'm just a-passing through.
My treasures are laid up
Somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me
From heaven's open door.
And I can't feel at home
in this world anymore*

*Oh Lord you know
I have no friend like you.
If heaven's not my home
then Lord what will I do?
The angels beckon me
From Heaven's open door.
And I can't feel at home
in this world anymore.*

So here I was, feeling really down, and what came to me was not the slow movement of Sibelius's *Violin Concerto*, Liszt's *Liebestraum*, or Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, or even one of Richard Strauss's *Last Songs*, but this simple gospel hymn from childhood. And as I walked along, I felt a sensation move up my arms and through my head, like a physical shivering, as my body reacted to this huge rush of spiritual feelings. I may have a great deal of difficulty with the theology of that hymn, but one thing I knew for sure: I didn't feel at home in

this world right at that moment, and this music spoke to me with a connection as direct, as visceral, as a lover's touch in the heat of passion.

I suspect that most people who say they hate gospel music are afraid of it. They say it is inferior music, they sneer at its sentimentality, its simplistic theological views. But poke at this sophisticated snideness and you will find simple fear. Fear of gospel music's intimacy, fear of its directness, and most of all, fear of the connection gospel music makes between our minds and our bodies, between our heart and our body. We cannot listen to this music without feeling our toes begin to tap, our fingers and arms and legs to move, our heads to nod. This music releases often long suppressed feelings we have. It speaks directly to our hearts.

The best music feeds both our intellect and our emotions. Classical music, when it errs, most often errs in concentrating on the head and not the heart. (And it becomes a refuge for the feeling-impaired.) Gospel music, it could be argued, does the opposite, focusing on the experience at the expense of the intellect. (And becoming a refuge for the sentimental.) I find the balance in embracing both and making them part of my one world. I need them both, I love them both; gospel and classical are indivisible in my daily life.

Literary Refractions

Acts of Concealment, the published proceedings of the 1990 Waterloo, Ontario conference on “Mennonite/s Writing in Canada,” included a poem by Sarah Klassen entitled “A brief history of Edison Avenue.”¹ This compelling poem begins:

When you find it the Promised Land
is a narrow river of mud
that wraps itself like glue around your Russian boots
and bicycle wheels. The fierce sun
grinds it to dust the wind flings
howling in your face. Winters
your children get lost in its white raging.

Further on, it urges:

You must never forget God
brought you here to tend one tethered cow
a small barnful of leghorns
a kitchen garden where the trees grew.

He wants you to love him in a clapboard church
you build when you’ve made the long way
home from peddling onions eggs your first ripe corn
to the ladies in River Heights.

The poem is set in North Kildonan, once a kind of rural-urban garden village in the north-east corner of Winnipeg. Frank H. Epp described North Kildonan in his history *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940* as a form of settlement that became “a significant bridge for urbanizing [Mennonite] agriculturalists.”² Now fully absorbed in Greater Winnipeg, North Kildonan remains a home to, and exhibits an ethos complexly influenced by, large numbers of Mennonites.

In the years when Sarah Klassen was growing up, she lived for a time on the outskirts of the North Kildonan settlement, “with its five-acre and one-acre lots, characterized by chicken barns and vegetable gardens”³; for a time she lived even further north, in Manitoba’s Interlake district, generally known for its Icelandic rather than its Mennonite settlers. “Days of Noah,” published here for the first time, could have been set in either of these places that Sarah Klassen knew as a child—or anywhere in between. The exact location of the story is clear only in this sense: the narrator, Hedwig, and her family live just out of reach of the city.

The city of Winnipeg has the largest urban population of Mennonites in the world and it has, without question, nurtured or at least hosted more writers of Mennonite heritage than any other urban centre anywhere. Sarah Klassen, David Waltner-Toews, Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, David Bergen, Armin Wiebe, Miriam Toews, Sandra Birdsell, and Rudy Wiebe—all these and others have, at one time in their lives at least, made a home in Winnipeg. All but Rudy Wiebe were first published by Winnipeg’s most prominent literary publisher, Turnstone Press (and Rudy Wiebe was living in Winnipeg when *Peace Shall Destroy Many*⁴ was published in 1962). Yet, aside from occasional, often not very explicit references to Winnipeg in the work of these writers (and with the exception of Patrick Friesen’s recent collection of poems *St. Mary at Main*⁵), Winnipeg remains much less richly inscribed in the published work of Mennonite writers than the village landscapes that make up what we know as southern Manitoba.

Although only the very last section of Sarah Klassen’s “Days of Noah” is set in the city that, for over a century, defined urban life for so many Manitoba Mennonites, Winnipeg hovers over the events and emotions of the story as a powerful—though ultimately ambiguous—presence. Klassen’s story evokes something of the mystique of a place that helped to shape the consciousness of so many Mennonites over the past century and more. “Days of Noah,” which mysteriously encompasses and finally only barely occupies this place, suggests something of the wealth of stories and poems that remain to be written about the Mennonite experience in this great city on the plains.

Notes

¹ Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe, eds., *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1992).

² Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 189.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962).

⁵ Patrick Friesen, *St. Mary at Main* (Winnipeg: The Muses' Company, 1998).

Days of Noah

Sarah Klassen

Every Saturday my mother chased down and slaughtered a leghorn, the fattest she could catch, and by the time I was twelve I was expected to help with the weekly beheading. My part was to clutch the red comb with my reluctant fingers and pull so the neck stretched tight over the oak stump which over the years had become dark, stained like an altar. My mother gripped the body with one hand, an axe with the other. A dull thud, and blood dribbled down from the severed head in my hand to the brown grass around my toes. My mother held the twitching, headless body away from her until the dripping stopped. The other hens raised their heads briefly in alarm. Then, as if they were afraid time was running out for them, they returned with urgency to their pecking.

We had chicken every Sunday. This Sunday, because my mother's friends, three sisters, were coming by bus from Winnipeg, the chicken would be stuffed with *bobbat*, the potatoes mashed, my mother would brew real coffee instead of *prips* and we would eat in the living room. My father was gearing up, changing from greasy, barn-stained chore overalls to his brand new pair. He didn't allow his denims to be washed, ever. "It takes the firmness out of them," he told my mother. "It fades them." His word was the law. My mother, I knew, would have wanted him to wear the pants of his only suit, dark blue, but she didn't suggest it. If he so much as guessed that there was an attempt underfoot to impress someone, that's when he was capable of coming to the table in his stained and stiffened chore overalls, and that was something to be avoided.

The Ford was temporarily free of carburetor trouble, there was gas in the tank and my father hadn't raised a single objection against driving out to the main highway to meet the Sunday morning Grey Goose run from Winnipeg.

Sarah Klassen is well known as a poet. Her volumes of poems include Journey to Yalta (Turnstone, 1988), Violence and Mercy (Netherlandic, 1991), Borderwatch (Netherlandic, 1993), and Dangerous Elements (Quarry Women's Books, 1998). She has published short fiction in numerous literary magazines, and is anticipating the publication of her first collection of stories, to be released later this year: Days of Noah (Turnstone, 2000).

“You can drive with your father to the bus,” my mother told me early Sunday morning, potato peel flying from her paring knife. She made it sound like a privilege to sit beside him while the three visitors crowded into the back.

“Ellie can go,” I offered quickly, but my mother paid no attention.

I knew with a dull, unwelcome knowing that I was to serve as shield and protection. Ellie was only five, and not protection enough. My father was scared of meeting three women he didn’t know very well and this embarrassed me, the way I felt embarrassed whenever he asked for flour, raisins and sugar in his immigrant English at Tymchuk’s store.

My mother was afraid, too. She arranged and rearranged the geraniums in the window at least three times. Recipes and poems clipped from the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer*, usually strewn here and there on every available surface, were gathered up and pushed behind plates in the cupboard or slipped inside the Bible or under the embroidered, lace-edged runners. My Saturday dusting, usually accepted as being done if I said so, had been scrutinized and tested, and I had been ordered to cut a bunch of calendula and daisies for the table. This once my father would do the midday chores alone—mash, oyster shells and water—and the dishes would be left for me, no use begging. The fussing and preparation left me irritable. I wanted to withdraw from it all.

My father and I never had what might be called a conversation, so the drive to the highway was silent. That morning he had read his favourite verses in our before-breakfast Bible reading even Ellie has to sit through. He didn’t go out of his way to choose the verses; we’d been labouring steadily through the gospel of Matthew for several weeks and that morning we reached them, quite naturally: *As it was in the days of Noah, people were eating and drinking, buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and took them all away. So it will be...two women will be grinding at a hand mill. One will be taken and the other left.*

I was afraid my father was going to remind me of those ominous words that hovered over my childhood like outspread wings. Knowledge of the Days of Noah had entered me early and lay lodged deep in my consciousness. There was no escape. While waiting for my father to mention them, I tried with a kind of daring to fill the silence by imagining orgies of eating and drinking, a sort of Persian feast with everyone reclining on Ali Baba carpets, devouring chicken

and fried sausage and pineapple and huge chocolate cakes. Wine sparkled red in crystal glasses. The feast was a shimmering kaleidoscope of colour and noise. It was followed remorselessly by mysterious disappearances. *One taken and one left.*

My father seemed to have forgotten the prophetic words. He commented occasionally on the ripeness of the wheatfields that rushed by and twice asked me for the names of our visitors. He didn't mention Noah. That proved how nervous he was.

"Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda." The name "Mathilda" intrigued me, it wasn't the usual name for a Mennonite woman, and struck me as very modern, very sophisticated, very beautiful. With my whole heart I desired the name Mathilda. It was one more wish to add to a string of wishes—for a piano, for permission to wear pants like my friends, for my parents to speak English like every one else's parents. With stubborn hope, I carried these huge, vain wishes around with me. Occasionally I put one of them into words for my mother's benefit on the faint chance that she would pass them on to my father with that insistence she was capable of mustering if something really mattered to her. From me to my mother to my father—that was the chain of communication that prevailed in our household. My burning wishes, it seemed to me, mattered little to either of them.

My father parked at the intersection across from the Esso station, the regular Grey Goose bus stop, and we got out of the hot car. I looked down the highway for signs of a dust cloud that might signal a vehicle as large as a bus. There was nothing. I tried to imagine what these three women, my mother's friends from childhood, from an impossible village in Russia, would look like. Three. How would that work if the Days of Noah were to happen today, now, while the yet unseen bus was roaring toward us along the dusty highway? If Elizabeth is sitting with Martha, who will be taken and who left? Or if Martha is sitting with Matilda—Oh please, no! Not Matilda.

"It's coming," my father called sharply and a cold, damp chill raced down my spine and along my arms. But he only meant the bus.

The first evidence that Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda had really arrived was the appearance of six shiny, black-patent shoes with high heels. They emerged one by one from the darkness of the bus and sank into the loose gravel at the edge of the road, each one the base for a sleek leg and naturally the bodies

followed. Not as tall as my mother, not as slender. Their pale, summery dresses were sprinkled with tiny flowers and adorned with strings of pearls and sparkling brooches. My father stepped bravely forward to help with a cluster of lumpy, fantastic packages that emerged with the women from the bus.

“So this is Hedwig. What a fine big girl you are. Blue eyes like your Papa. How old are you, Hedwig? Look at her, Martha, so tanned, she’s been helping Mama in the garden. What grade are you in? A few weeks and it’s back to school, eh, Hedwig, that make you happy? Pretty soon boyfriends, yes? Where’s the little sister?”

It wasn’t necessary for me to reply, there was no room for that. It wasn’t expected. They obviously couldn’t think of things to ask my father, so they surrounded me with a buzz of questions and exclamations, like bees in the alfalfa on a hot day. Struck dumb with embarrassment, I endured the onslaught.

When we were all settled in the car there was a time of silence while my father attended to the driving and the windows were rolled up to protect Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda’s hair against wind and dust. My blouse stuck damply to my back and sweat dribbled down my legs. Now and then I caught a trace of scent, perfume that I was sure came from Mathilda. Although I had looked forward, grudgingly, to this visit, part of me wished I could hurry time and it would be tomorrow, a whole day open before me like a new book, a day that was fresh as the morning air after rain. A day unmarred by visitors and their relentless talking and at the end of it piles of dirty dishes looming before me.

Although I had never seen them before, I knew plenty about our visitors who sat squished and beaming in their fine dresses in the back seat. My mother had told me often that in Russia their father had been a millionaire, had owned three flour mills, each four storeys high, and had built the bank and the church in the large village where they lived. He had hired any teacher *he* wanted for the school. Here in Canada he had to peddle eggs in the streets of Winnipeg. Elizabeth and Martha worked in sewing factories, Mathilda was a maid for a wealthy English family. To me their changed circumstances meant very little against the overwhelming fact that they lived in Winnipeg, a city with street after street of fine houses, a park with a zoo and flower gardens, and Eaton’s. A city I had entered two or three times in my life, accompanied by unbearable excitement and, of course, my parents.

Although we had not visited Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda on our rare excursions to Winnipeg, I could easily picture them walking smartly along the sidewalk, their elegant heels clicking on the pavement. They stepped into Eaton's, their fine dresses swishing around their sleek legs as they ascended on escalators. They came home from work, home to a fine house, sat down to dinner at an elegant table, and afterwards Matilda would sit at the piano and beautiful melodies would float up from her fingers and swirl around delicate china figurines, ethereal angels, rearing horses, swans placed here and there on ornate furniture.

My mother came rushing to the car, calling, "Hello, hello there," her cheeks flushed, imperiously shooing away the skittish leghorns, all signs of nervousness gone, as if she'd flung it into the closet with her everyday dress. She had changed to her paisley cotton, her favourite, and a clean white apron over it. Ellie skipped furious circles around everyone, her pale braids flying, her small bare feet kicking up the dust.

"Stop it," my mother said.

After my father's lengthy prayer there was an awkward, decent silence around the table and then, as if eating and drinking dissolved all barriers, the visitors spilled out a rhapsody of praise for my mother's chicken, tender under the crisp brown skin, the thick farm cream, the garden fresh peas, the gravy, richly golden and smooth as silk.

"Delicious, delicious, delicious," Elizabeth gushed, and Mathilda, "Gravy like satin, Frieda, how do you *do* it? Like satin!" Their delight was so unconstrained, so boundless that I found it embarrassing. My mother made me leave my full plate of chicken and sent me to the kitchen for more of everything for our guests.

She was transformed, her voice so animated it sparkled, and I was surprised at the way her laughter bubbled up and flowed out into the room. Her brown hands flitted and gestured, her tongue danced. "More chicken," she urged. "Elizabeth, your plate's empty. Pass it here, right now. Just plain farm food, but you must eat. Pickles, Mathilda? Coffee? Take cream, it's one thing we've got lots of. Come next week and you'll get ripe tomatoes and the corn's just about ready. The garden's got more than just plain old peas. Too bad everything's so late this year. I guess in the city you make sage dressing, all I can offer you is *bobbat*." Her comparisons left me cringing.

When everyone's plate was filled, and hers untouched, she went on, "What's Tina Poetker doing, have you heard? Susie Gerber—she still working for that Scotch woman? Susie Gerber, I can just hear her, how she could *sing*. Like a lark. Is it true Neufeld's Lisa married that widower from Winkler? Haven't had a letter in months. Where *is* everyone?" Words flew across the table and multiplied to fill the afternoon.

"Think of it," my father said that evening, in a voice that could have been the prophet Jeremiah's, ready to deliver a pronouncement, an oracle. "Such a life. Such a misdirected life."

"What." My mother's voice was flat now, the word not quite a question. She had changed into her everyday dress and was sweeping up.

I stared at my sister, who was flitting like a drunk puppy between the blue tea set and the colouring book and crayons that had emerged from the lumpy packages Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda had carried off the bus. "We forgot you're twelve already," Mathilda apologized when she gave me the colouring book. I had washed up the dinner dishes and the afternoon coffee cups, dried them and even put some of them away in the cupboard. I had been everyone's slave for a whole day, a whole, entire wasted day, with no time even to run down the road to see Eleanor Tymchuk, and for all that sacrifice there would be no reward.

"Think of it. Working from eight to five in a factory. And what do they get? Don't think they get good salaries, because they don't. The unhealthy air, people always smoking. Living by the clock. Always doing what the boss tells you, no chance to plan or make decisions. I'll bet they're still making payments on a house that always needs repairs and always will. Can you see yourself working for English ladies, like Mathilda? It's not what we were meant for. When we came to Canada we promised to be farmers. A city is godless, if you ask me. You can thank God you don't have to live like your friends."

"How late will you be tonight, mixing the feed? Do you need help with the eggs?" My mother's voice, I could tell, invited a "No."

But my father didn't seem to hear. "As it was in the days of Noah," he said. "Always buying and selling, eating and drinking. It's a sign. A sign of the times," and I wondered if he meant what Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda were used to eating in the city or the meal my mother had worked so hard to prepare and of which he had eaten a good portion. I wanted to step up to my father and

tell him I would rather live in the city, I would rather breathe that terrible city air, walk on pavement instead of mud. And if he liked the farm better, he could stay and keep Ellie. I and my mother would leave them behind and escape to the city. She would work for an English lady and I would learn to play piano.

“Mathilda said my gravy was like satin.” My mother paused in her sweeping, stood with both hands clasping the broom, her head raised, her eyes suddenly bright, as if something unexpected had happened to surprise her, someone had given her a prize or something. “Did you see she took a second helping? I said it was the cream, you need fresh cream for good gravy. I gave her a jar so she can try for herself. Hedwig, get Ellie to bed, quick. It’s late.”

“As it was in the days of Noah.” My father raised himself reluctantly from the chair. He had changed to his old overalls, stiff and dark with stains. “You stay inside,” he told my mother. “I’ll manage.”

I imagined Matilda in her summery print dress, sitting next to a closed window on the Grey Goose bus, carefully holding a jar of farm cream on her lap, as wheatfields and poplar bush and clusters of lonely farm buildings rushed by, mile after mile, until they gave way to tall, stately buildings, paved streets and clipped green lawns, smooth as velvet and nobody there gave a single thought of the Days of Noah.

I was sixteen, and we had moved to another farm, not a better one, but closer to town so I could go to high school. Beside the dusty gravel road leading to the house, the poplars, in summer, were dust-choked, just like the other farm, and the leghorns revelled in dust baths all over the yard and in the afternoon found shade behind the drab buildings or under bushes. Between my parents and my new friends’ parents there existed an impossible abyss. That hadn’t changed. I had resigned myself to the dismal reality that immigrant accents have the tenacity of sow thistles, that my mother wasn’t about to cut her hair and get it permed like the English ladies. “Why should I?” she said, skilfully and quickly twisting the brown, waist-length cascade into a shining rope which she fashioned into a huge figure eight and secured with hairpins. I knew I had no answer that would satisfy her.

Gathie Thiessen was coming to the farm, a friend of my mother's who lived on Vancouver Island, in Victoria, a city none of us had ever seen, and therefore must surely be more wonderful, more out of reach even than Winnipeg.

"I want Gathie to see that my life is a good life, too," my mother told me, the week before her coming. I understood, with a jolt of amazement, that her words were both a confession and an enlistment of my good will, a plea for congenial behaviour, something I didn't find necessary to practice those days. My mother didn't usually take me into her confidence, and her words startled me, as if she'd walked naked into the kitchen. Were her efforts to entertain her English neighbours evidence that she examined her life as I examined mine, measuring it against my friend Carol's, was it better or worse?

"There has to be a green salad," I informed my mother, in the spare way of communicating I had perfected. "Tossed."

"Tossed, what's that?" she asked. "If it has to be, then you make it." Her voice was bordered with scorn for what she considered needlessly frivolous and fancy English cooking I was learning in home ec class. At the same time her words were fearful, a plea for help. She stirred and stirred the gravy and spread out the white damask tablecloth Elizabeth, Martha, Mathilda had brought her from Winnipeg four years ago. As if she considered chicken too common for someone from Victoria, she had coaxed my father into buying a roast of beef. Ellie was big enough now to help me with the dishes. "No use begging," my mother warned, and I knew she meant both of us.

I didn't bother reminding her that for other people "dinner" was not the noon meal. What would be the use? I regretted mentioning the tossed salad. I should have known my mother would use it against me. But having suggested it, I felt bound to check out the garden for lettuce, the last doubtful radishes, carrots that were still young and thin, but very sweet. "It's always the dressing makes the salad," our home ec teacher repeated *ad nauseum*. I knew with a sinking heart that our kitchen shelves held no olive oil, no Worcestershire sauce, no tarragon, no fresh lemon.

The amazing thing about Gathie was that although she had come from Russia on the same boat as my mother, she had studied in Strasbourg at the university, and was teaching high school French in Victoria. No other Mennonite woman my mother's age, at least none I knew of, was a teacher.

My mother kept a pile of Gathie Thiessen's letters in a box in a dresser drawer that held other valuable treasures hoarded over the years: boxes of newspaper pictures and clippings about the royal family, a collection of faded pictures from Russia, tatted lace grown yellow. Gathie wrote on paper tinted pink or mauve and always bordered with exquisite flowers. The handwriting was small and spidery, delicate and perfectly neat. Before she stored the latest letter in her dresser drawer, my mother read it out loud to us.

"It's hard to believe June is just a month away," Gathie would write in spring. "I have to take summer school, but then I'm driving to Los Angeles. I'm so looking forward to this change from routine and responsibility, you can't imagine how much." In December it was, "You'll be surprised to hear I'm flying to Bermuda for Christmas. These things have to be done before one is old. I wish you were going with me, Frieda. Can't your family spare you? Not at Christmas, of course, but maybe in summer."

The idea was preposterous, and naturally it was never even considered. "Gathie just has no idea what happens on a farm in summer," my mother said, in that defensively impatient tone she used when speaking of the ways of city people, when there were no city people present. I was disappointed that she didn't at least put up a fight for Bermuda.

Once at Easter Gathie wrote in her card: "Last week I took my class to the art gallery. It was a long and very difficult afternoon." That was all and the sparseness caught me unawares. I had never been to an art gallery. Why was it difficult? This year she had written, "I'll be driving to Winnipeg in July. Can you send me directions to your farm?"

Gathie was easily as tall as my mother, her stylishly short hair just beginning to grey around her forehead. Her lips were crimson. I could tell she wore eye make-up too, just a touch of blue-grey, and to me she looked queenly, years younger than my mother. Her hands cradling the coffee cup were soft and white, her nails smooth and pink as wild rose petals. She took very small helpings of vegetables and of the tossed salad, but no meat. And no gravy. When she spoke to me in perfect English, I was very impressed.

"Don't ever be a teacher, Hedwig," she said, shifting her attention to me. "Children can be so cruel. And teenagers—teenagers are monsters, plain and simple. You just have no idea." As if she'd forgotten that I was a teenager. As if I didn't know exactly what she was talking about. Billy Stefanik and the other

guys at the back of the room firing off a barrage of spitballs and Mrs. Crane always too slow to catch them at it. My best friend Carol would spend all of English class writing notes to everyone near by. Even when we were reading *Wuthering Heights*.

“They wear you out,” Gathie said, her voice desperate, almost bitter. “They’re always lashing out against authority. Never interested in anything you want to teach them, just endangering their lives tearing around in those noisy beat-up cars they always manage to get from God knows where. Or they hang out in the cafeteria and fill their stomachs with greasy French fries swimming in gravy.”

“A sign of the godless times,” my father said, but his voice lacked conviction, as if Gathie had taken the wind out of his sails. It was hard to tell if he had really heard, or if he was thinking it was time for water and mash, the eggs should be collected, he better get going. He always heaped his plate with potatoes and lots of gravy, enough so there was never need for a second helping. I was afraid he was going to speak about the Days of Noah, about eating and drinking, buying and selling, but Gathie wasn’t finished.

“The phys ed teacher, now *he* knows how to discipline,” she was saying, admiration and envy mixed in her voice. “When he wants to punish students he just makes them run laps around the gym, or if it’s summer, around the outdoor track. And just to be sure they get thoroughly worn out he runs with them. He’s really fit, you should see him. Now that’s a fine idea. But it’s not something I can do.”

No, I could see that. I tried to picture Gathie running in her sleek navy pumps, her wool plaid skirt flapping around her thin legs, her hairdo losing its perfect shape, puffing to keep up with a guilty student who out of spite would tear like crazy around the track. I choked and spluttered, holding back the giggles that threatened to erupt.

There was no real conversation, it was more like our guest was lecturing, and I found myself putting her in Mrs. Crane’s place, in front of the class. Would her face turn red with helpless anger, like Mrs. Crane’s? Would she give boring assignments? Would she ever laugh?

My mother sat silent and somewhat detached from Gathie’s outpouring. Then a flicker of surprise crossed her face, as if she had caught a glimmer of something she hadn’t seen before. The detachment gave way to attentiveness;

she leaned forward to catch Gathie's every word. Then, as if she had been given a nudge, she rose briskly, and, in the voice she kept for preventing juvenile protest, said, "Hedwig, Ellie, the dishes now."

As I roused myself, unwillingly, to help Ellie clear the table, I heard our mother say, as if to a small child, "Come, Gathie. Come, we'll go into the other room." I had never heard her voice so gentle.

Ellie insisted on washing and that was fine with me. "You're way too slow," she said. "We'd be doing dumb dishes till supper." She was quiet, almost sullen. She wasn't usually like that; I was the sullen one. I figured it must be because Gathie hadn't noticed her, hadn't said, "What a fine girl," hadn't even asked her age. Had brought no presents.

Ellie's silence was fine with me, I was determined to hear what my mother and Gathie were saying, seated side by side on the faded green living-room couch over coffee. I made sure the door was left open, just a little, so that above the clatter of dishes I could hear their voices, subdued and intense and constantly threatening to disappear altogether. Straining, I made out snatches: "Vassilyevka" or "Gusarovka," something about orchards and watermelon fields and old Johannes Martens who refused to leave the village with his family because the ocean was so terrifying, Canada so far away.

"Where in God's name do you think he is now?" That was Gathie's voice.

"Taken," my mother said in hushed voice. "Sent north."

Sometimes they spoke Russian, a sign that my mother was aware of the open door. They're telling each other everything, I thought. Like Carol and me. My mother and Gathie, reliving a life I had never known, growing up again in a Russian village I would never see, speaking a language that shut me out. There they were, on the windswept deck of a fabulous ship, seaspray on their faces, the lucky ones, the saved, leaning lightly against the railing, staring across the huge ocean for the first glimpse of a new shore. A brand new life.

Did my mother have any warning, any inkling that she'd land in this bleak, adventureless life? Could that be my destiny, too? The idea was unbearable.

The sun was still far from sinking into the horizon, but the wind had begun to die, leaving an early calm, when the four of us stood together on the driveway following the retreat of Gathie's car along the gravel driveway. We

watched it make a left turn onto the highway, gain speed, gather a cloud of dust and vanish into another world.

My mother raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. She was the last to turn away. I wondered if she longed to be in that car with Gathie, the two of them hurtling away from the farm, away from the leghorns and the huge garden with its endless rows of carrots and beets, past wheatfields and bleak bush into a more splendid existence, one more chance for adventure. Or had that ocean voyage brought them to the promised land?

“She’s wearing herself out,” my father said. “Teaching city kids is too much for her. You saw that, didn’t you? Did you see how thin she is? She won’t last.”

“We’d better collect the eggs before it’s dark,” my mother said. “Come,” as if putting an end to the afternoon, an end to Gathie.

I almost said, then, that I’d get the eggs for her, she could stay inside, she didn’t have to change into her old clothes. She could read the “Home Loving Hearts” pages she cut each week from the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer* and collected in stacks for the day when she’d have time to read them. Boring letters from farm women like her who sent in recipes for feather-light cakes, hints for keeping the outhouse odourless, awful poems they had written about the sunrise or about their cows or roosters. I wanted to tell her that her life was as good as Gathie’s—no, much better, though I didn’t for a minute believe that.

But I kept silent. Freedom from barn chores was a victory I’d won through a long and difficult battle, my chief strategy an unrelenting sullenness, complaint, exaggerated comparisons of my life with Carol’s. I had strengthened my siege with just enough grudging cooperation where inside chores were concerned. I couldn’t retreat now. My parents, careful to avoid leghorn droppings, walked wordlessly back to the house to change into chore clothes.

“Hedwig, there’s nothing to do,” Ellie’s voice was restrained, deliberately reasonable. “Do you feel like walking down to see Mrs. Yaremchuk, her cat has six new kittens, they’re so cute and still blind?”

I said nothing, knowing Ellie wouldn’t nag or whine, she never did. But as I walked alone to the house, leaving Ellie forlorn in the yard, I felt as if I’d missed something important. An opportunity. I found the copy of *Wuthering Heights* Mrs. Crane had loaned me for the summer, and began reading where I’d left off, the part where Cathie is deliriously plucking feathers from the pillow

and accusing Heathcliff of shooting lapwings on the heath. As I lost myself on that heath, the lapwings kept turning into leghorns. Rows of white eggs materialized on the page. The assured hand reaching for them was my mother's.

My father was taken and my mother left. The hand of judgement reached for him some months after I had escaped, with Carol, to the dingy fourth-floor room in the bleak residence at the University of Manitoba. It came in the guise of sudden failure of the heart, one morning after hours of hoisting the heavy bags of feed from the half-ton to his shoulders, then loading filled egg crates on to the truck to haul to the city to sell. This farm, like the previous one, had resisted productivity the way quack grass resists eradication.

Evenings he would spread the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer* on the kitchen table and in a few minutes his shoulders would slump, his head drop to his denim chest and from his altered breathing it was obvious he'd fallen asleep, exhausted. "Don't sit there," my mother roused him, sometimes impatiently, sometimes gently. "You won't get rest that way. Come to bed."

I was surprised how much at rest he looked in the coffin. And how thin, despite a lifetime of large helpings of chicken and potatoes and gravy. Only his shoulders, under the dark blue fabric of his suit, were broad and substantial. His hair, too, was thin and had begun to grey. My mother, whose hair showed no signs of grey, was left to sell the farm and move to the city with Ellie.

One Saturday morning, and not to my delight, I found Mathilda drinking tea at the kitchen table in my mother's tiny apartment. The fresh cinnamon aroma of the apple cake my mother had baked filled the kitchen. I was surprised to see how heavy Mathilda had become. Glancing surreptitiously at her feet, I detected puffy ankles swelling over the edges of worn grey sneakers. My mother was still slender, her ankles firm.

"Good you came, Hedwig," my mother said. "Ellie's a lazybones today. Still sleeping. Have some cake."

"Mmmm," Mathilda crooned, "Wonderful. Frieda, your apple cake is so wo-o-onderful." As she reached for another slice, her face, her body, her plump hands spoke of repose, of being replete, of perfect contentment. My mother's

hands were restless. They wanted to be thinning beets, or slicing tomatoes. They wanted to grasp the carcass of a chicken and rip the entrails from it, tear out the hard stomach and the tiny heart.

“Isn’t Saturday like heaven?” Mathilda gushed. “Just sitting here like this. Tea, and your scrumptious baking, Frieda. Oh Frieda, weren’t we lucky, you and me, getting out of Russia alive, thank God. So lucky to live here in peace. So happy.”

Mathilda was working at the post office now, my mother had told me, handling bulky packages, always on her feet, her legs often in pain, the veins in them swelling darkly. What was so lucky about that? And I couldn’t believe my mother taking her hand and telling her, no strings attached, “You and me, Matilda, we have to be always grateful.”

“This afternoon I’m making *Bodentorte* with strawberries and whipped cream,” Mathilda was saying. “*Real* whipped cream. I always buy a pint at Safeway on weekends. If my sisters don’t bring me some.”

Elizabeth and Martha had married farmers, widowers with children who needed mothers. There were also gardens that needed tending, houses to be kept clean. “Of course they’re happy,” Mathilda said when my mother asked. “They have children. A home.”

“The Kroegers are coming tomorrow,” she went on, “and Susie Gerber. And you come, too, Frieda, of course. And Hedwig, you too. Can you come, Hedwig?”

“Wish I could, Mathilda.” I had no intention of reliving the Flight Out Of Russia with my mother’s friends. Not that it didn’t intrigue me, that familiar litany of narrow escapes that could easily fill a Sunday afternoon. The marauding hordes of bandits, the famine, typhus, the lice-infested Red Army. The villagers fearful of staying, fearful of leaving. Those who chose to leave crammed into trains that rattled them past the infamous gate with the red star. Those who stayed--silence. All my life I’d heard stories of the saved and speculation about those left behind.

“After the bandits ransacked the village your grandfather read Psalm 37,” my father used to tell Ellie and me. “*Trust in the Lord and do good, that’s what he read to us. Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.* And next day we

fled. Left everything behind.” Then he would fall silent, a wry smile flickering around his mouth, as if he was meditating on the irony.

Carol and I had staked out Sunday afternoon for our own Great Escape--from English papers, from the dingy residence. Yesterday after class we had tried on last year’s bathing suits, taking turns strutting for each other and for the mirror, judging and being judged. Stripped to skin and swim suits, prone on the white sand of Grand Beach, our innocent contours fitting themselves into its soft warmth, we would no longer be shy and awkward. No one would be able to tell we had grown up on a farm. We would become miraculously sleek and golden brown all over. We would be tempting as the new-born Venus. We would be irresistible.

I was saved from making excuses to Mathilda when Ellie appeared, still warm and pink from sleep, still in her pyjamas, her hair a blonde tousled halo. Mathilda reached out with both arms and my sister walked warmly into them. My mother cut her a slice of cake, poured a glass of milk.

“Hedwig, did I tell you I’m starting work Monday.” It was an announcement rather than a question and my mother made it on the way from the stove to the table. Her face glowed with delight, as if she were the lucky contestant chosen for adventure and the coffee pot she carried a winner’s trophy.

“What? where?” The idea of my mother working anywhere but in a garden or in a chicken barn or at the kitchen stove caught me off guard. I wasn’t sure whether I should congratulate her or be surprised or show sympathy. What did I know about my mother? What did I know about her desires, about what would make her happy? I didn’t even know if she had any favourite verse from the Bible. I stared at her patterned, cotton dress, her worn hands.

Ellie had told me she no longer subscribed to *The Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer*. “You know all those clippings she kept from the ‘Home Loving Hearts’? One day she burned them, every last one. I couldn’t believe it. Said she wouldn’t need them now.”

After her friend Gathie had been killed, some years ago, in a car crash near Nanaimo my mother had taken out her letters, read through them methodically, out loud, carried them over to the trash can, then at the last minute bundled them up with a scrap of ribbon and stowed them once more in her dresser drawer.

“I’ll be cleaning the doctors’ offices at that medical clinic. In that strip mall behind the Esso. And they asked did I want to take the gowns home to wash. They still use cotton gowns for the patients. I’m planning to buy new curtains, and it’s time we got a new living room couch, don’t you think, we’ve had this old green one forever, and there’s always bills waiting to be paid and groceries to buy. With you at university and Ellie just in grade eleven, well, the money will come handy. Good thing Ellie saw the notice.”

She spoke with a conviction that kept questions at bay, that forbade doubt and fear. Her voice was the same one that had announced one summer on the second farm that the clouds were gathering for rain and the long rows of beets were thick with weeds.

“Hedwig, you’ll come with me, quick. And you too, Ellie.” She had a hoe for each of us. My mother gripped hers firmly with both hands, raising it, bringing it quickly and imperiously blade-down on the roots of pigweed and sow thistles and the tenacious quack grass that grew everywhere. “Go deep. And don’t leave the plants with their roots still in the ground,” she instructed to us. “They’ll just grow again.” From time to time she bent down, swiftly and without losing her rhythm, to pick by hand a weed that grew right in the row. Ellie was quickly left behind. Urged on by a sort of pride, or stubbornness, I struggled to keep up.

We followed our silent course, the three of us, up and down the rows, our backs bent, our hoes whacking, uprooted weeds and earth flying. The sky grew ominous, the thunder that had rumbled in the distance moved closer, the afternoon turned dark. Past the barn I could see the first brilliant jag of lightning smash to earth behind the poplar trees. “If a rain’s going to be a short one, the chickens will find shelter,” my father always said. “If it’s going to be long, they don’t bother.”

Beyond the garden the leghorns were scratching energetically in the dirt and weeds, their white backs eerily luminescent in the greyness. The first few pellets of rain broke, cold on my skin. “Ellie, you run to the house,” my mother called from her position slightly ahead, to my left. “No use all three of us getting wet.” Ellie flew to shelter.

I waited for my turn to be ordered to the house. I didn’t want to ask. I had a desire to be as brave, as calm as my mother. An orange flash lit up the next crack of thunder and I felt, unmistakably, a quick, fierce tingling in my right leg

and along my right upper arm. A crackling covered the top of my head like a swift burning. In my terror I kept on hoeing for several seconds before I stopped and yelled out, "Did you feel that?" I was ready to drop my hoe, surely now my mother would send me running to the house.

"What? Just keep going, or we'll never be done." She didn't look up. Her arms kept their rhythm, her shoulders remained in motion. When she finished her row, she turned to work mine. When we met, the whole world had grown opaque and utterly filled with the rush of pounding rain. The tingling in my limbs and head was diminishing like receding thunder.

"Run," she yelled and we raced, two drenched fugitives, to the dry safety of the house.

If I had been a little further right, I thought with a sort of wonder, or a little further forward, or behind, I might have been the one taken. And my mother left. I didn't even think that it could be the other way around, my mother taken. I was too shocked for anger, too frightened to tell anyone that I had felt the lightning.

"Pay sounds good," Mathilda was saying, and I knew instantly that everything about the new job had been confided to her. She lifted the cup to her mouth one last time and rose to go. I still couldn't think of anything to say to my mother, although I wanted to with all my heart.

"Mom, you'll like the job." Ellie was enthusiastic. "It'll be great. You'll see." My sister, still warm and glowing, still emerging from sleep, took dainty bites of apple cake. A smudge of milk glistened on her lip.

When we had arrived that wet summer day, dripping, at the house, Ellie was there holding the door wide open for us, sobbing out her fear of the storm and her fear for us. "Stop bawling," my mother said. The race against the storm left her exhilarated. She shook off the wetness triumphantly. "Get some towels. Run." From the kitchen window we watched as the heavens opened, sending the deluge down like a judgement. Instant pools of water dotted the yard. The wind gained force and whipped, furiously, the crowns of the poplar trees.

"Where's Dad," Ellie howled. I had forgotten him and so, apparently, had my mother in her elation over having finished the rows of beets. Was he unloading sacks of feed that shouldn't get wet? Was he waiting out the rain in the hen barn? Had he been struck by lightning?

“Shush, Ellie,” my mother scolded. We watched silently at the window, the three of us, until he appeared, a nebulous, ghost-like figure running toward us through the rain, his raised arms holding a gunny sack over his head for protection. It was Ellie who ran to the door. My mother had turned to the stove to begin supper.

“Frieda, a job, that’s something to be happy for,” Mathilda was saying. “Congratulations. Look at your daughters. Of course you need work. Weddings cost.” She stood to leave.

“You and me, Matilda, we’re the lucky ones,” my mother said, her face flushed and glowing from the baking, but also because of Matilda’s visit and her job, and maybe even because of her daughters. “Good you reminded me.”

I left soon after Mathilda. On the bus to the university I shut out the shoppers settling in with their packages, the high school kids chattering and jostling at the back. I shut out the traffic in the street, but it was impossible to shut out my mother’s glowing face, and maybe I didn’t want to. I willed my body to feel, in anticipation, the hot sand and sun at Grand Beach, to feel the wind on my face. I wanted to hear the cry of gulls as they soared and plummeted. I longed to be floating on the wide wetness of the lake, buoyed by the waves. There must be a way that I, too, could tear free from dread and bitterness and receive, finally, the desires of the heart.

Response to the Previous Issue

Linda Boynton Arthur, "Cloth, Constraint and Creativity: the Engendering of Material Culture Among the Holdeman Mennonites," *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Fall 1999 (17:3), 32-51

Beth Graybill, Lancaster, PA.

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According to Linda Boynton Arthur's essay, clothing norms for Holdeman Mennonite women function in various ways as elements of social control to constrain women. Arthur argues that quilting, by contrast, fulfills the sartorial, creative impulse of Holdeman women and thus acts as a form of collective resistance to patriarchal dress codes.

In considering Arthur's work, I find it useful to set it alongside my own ethnography with Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, another small group of conservative Mennonites.¹ The clothing prescriptions for both Holdeman and Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites are similar,² and both groups accept modern technology including cars, telephones, and electricity. Compared to outsiders, men's prescribed clothing in these groups differs less markedly than women's; this makes women's clothing the primary boundary marker. Thus, for conservative Mennonites, women's attire carries the weight of cultural separation from the world. I believe it is for this reason rather than because of male dominance (although patriarchy is a reality for both groups of conservative Mennonites) that women's clothing is of such importance among Holdeman and Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites.

While Arthur views all of clothing through the lens of constraint, or social control of women, the conservative Mennonite women in my study articulated a wide variety of meanings related to their clothing. Let me give just three examples (out of ten or so I identified in my work). First, conservative women's dress affords them a sense of internal motivation for right behavior. Lydia, an informant I interviewed, described it this way:

We want people to look at us and think of God. And the way you dress changes how you feel about yourself Because I dress plain, people expect something from me that they wouldn't expect if I didn't dress different from everybody else, which is a challenge But the dress, the plain dress, is a help to remind us of who we are.³

As Lydia's quote implies, wearing the prescribed clothing ("plain dress," in her parlance) calls forth a certain moral behavior among conservative Mennonite women.

Second, conservative dress provides a feeling of divine protection from harm, as Rebecca [another informant] indicates in the following quote:

I guess I thought of [my dress] more as a protection . . . from whether it be, um, violence or abuse or anything like that, that you could meet out in the streets. . . . I always thought of that as being a certain protection from physical harm that God gives.⁴

Several mothers I interviewed shared with me the reassurance they derived from believing that their daughter's conservative dress would keep them safe from male harassment.

And third, conforming to church dress codes offers women emotional security through a secure self-identity. As Kristina told me,

I can say that in this kind of dressing, with the cape dress and, and the covering, I, I found my role as a Christian woman It gave me a kind of *security* in a position I wanted to be. I thought, ah, now I'm, I'm living how Christ wants me to, to live.⁵

In contrast to the variety of sartorial meanings I discovered, Arthur's exclusive focus on social control as the sole meaning in women's dress may derive in part from her sources. She talks of interviewing a majority of the women in one particular Holdeman community in California, yet her most frequent references and her longest and most decisive quotes are from expelled members of that community. Arthur argues that women "feel threatened by the men of the community" with whom "clothing is a source of conflict," and women are "plagued by anxiety" over clothing concerns (35). This is in marked contrast to the women in my study.

Most of the women I interviewed expressed contentment with their clothing restrictions. As Rebecca mused, “It’s not a hard thing because I’ve always dressed this way. . . . [Besides,] I don’t have to worry about being all matching, or always in style.” In her essay Arthur cites Becky’s quote to illustrate the heavy rule of the Holdeman Church: “When I put on Mennonite clothing, I put on all of the Church’s rules” (36). Yet sartorially putting on the Church’s rules is a positive value for the women I interviewed, who found peace and, paradoxically, freedom, within their community’s constraints. As Jean told me, “The Eastern [Pennsylvania Mennonite] Church is like a lush, green garden with a fence around it. And I like [living within] that fence.” Arthur acknowledges that “what the Holdemans regard as signs of religiosity” are, in her work, “signs of socio-religious conformity” (37), which she casts as a negative. Of course, the negative value of conformity is not far from the positive value of community and uniformity, the aspects emphasized by the women in my study.

Finally, those of us who work as ethnographers (i.e. cultural critics who use qualitative methodology, such as interviews) must consider carefully the framework we bring to a particular body of research. A feminist critique longs for resistance; in this work, how do women resist dress codes? Arthur tells us that young women in their dating years bend the dress code to attract a mate, but this hardly supports her claim of women’s “collective resistance” (43), nor her argument that “Subtle changes in dress then, function symbolically to establish solidarity among women and to circumvent patriarchal control” (35).

In my study I did not find much resistance, nor did I find women articulating discomfort with dress codes that I would have found terribly restrictive. The reality is that most women among conservative Mennonite groups *do not* resist dress codes, for to do so would mean leaving their community, and straining if not severing family and friendship ties. This is a choice few women are willing to make.⁶ As Rebecca told me, “You would have to have a good reason for leaving. And something else out there to connect yourself with. Otherwise you’d be totally alone.”

Nor is quilting necessarily an act of resistance to patriarchal cloth constraints, as Arthur argues. From my research, quilting is more about the love of order and beauty than about sartorial resistance. Nor is it the only

avenue for creativity allowed conservative Mennonite women. Others include flower gardening, canning, and baking (the latter two being works of both art and appetite). The danger for those of us who position ourselves as cultural critics, it seems to me, is in seeing resistance where it doesn't exist.

Thinking like an anthropologist, a useful methodology by which to approach qualitative work like Arthur and I do, requires trying to understand a different cultural meaning system from the inside out, not imposing a particular agenda. So the research question becomes, What are the values of the culture under study and how do they compare with the values I bring to it as a researcher? – and this, incidentally, *is* an important *feminist* research question.

Notes

¹ The Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church numbers about 10,000. Beginning in 1993 I explored the multiple meanings of women's dress and gender roles in this Church through interviews and participant observation with women in Lancaster and Lebanon counties in central Pennsylvania. See "'To Remind Us of Who We Are': An Ethnographic Exploration of Women's Dress and Gender Roles in a Conservative Mennonite Community," by Beth E. Graybill, master's thesis, University of Maryland, 1995; see also my chapter forthcoming in, *Quiet in the Land? Anabaptist Women in Historical Perspective* (John Hopkins University Press).

² Although the specific dress codes differ somewhat between Holdeman Mennonites and Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, both groups require women to cover their heads and adhere to one prescribed dress style. A cape dress, the prescribed dress style for Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women includes an extra layer of fabric – a cape – over the bust, designed to mask a woman's figure.

³ Interview with Lydia, October 10, 1993. Tape recording in the author's possession.

⁴ Interview with Rebecca, June 16, 1995. Tape recording in the author's possession.

⁵ Interview with Kristina, June 25, 1995. Tape recording in the author's possession.

⁶ In the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, relatively few people do, in fact, leave. According to two church bishops I spoke with, the Church retains more than 90 percent of its young people, and most of those who leave are young men. Unlike the Amish, who condone a period of youthful experimentation with the world and its pleasures, this is not acceptable to most conservative Mennonites.

Book Reviews

Jacobus ten Doornkaat Koolman. *Dirk Philips: Friend and Colleague of Menno Simons, 1504-1568*. Trans. William Keeney, ed. C. Arnold Snyder. Kitchener, ON / Scottsdale, PA: Pandora Press / Herald Press, 1998.

In his introduction to *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, C. J. Dyck states that Philips “ranks second only to Menno Simons in his influence on Dutch Anabaptism during the first decades of the movement” (11). When it comes to the writings of Dirk – which are more systematic and comprehensive than Menno’s – Dutch scholars might rank him even higher than Menno. Although *The Writings of Dirk Philips* have been available in Dutch since 1564 and in English since 1910, hardly any systematic work has been done on Dirk’s theology or historic research on his life.

In order to fill this gap, ten Doornkaat Koolman’s biography of Philips has been translated into English by William Keeney and edited by C. Arnold Snyder. The author was born in 1889 in Hamburg, Germany, studied theology in Marburg and Berlin, and at the Mennonite Seminary in Amsterdam from 1911 to 1915. Under the influence of professors Cramer and de Bussy, he developed a keen interest in Anabaptist history and theology. His many articles on these subjects, and his contributions to the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* and *Mennonite Encyclopedia* bear witness to his scholarship. For his *proponenexamen* in 1913 he wrote a paper on Dirk Philips. He continued his research on Dirk for a future dissertation but had to interrupt it in 1915. Not until his retirement in 1957 was he able to return to his research and finally in 1964 to have his biography published.

Ten Doornkaat Koolman knows all the available sources. The endnotes alone fill fifty-five of the 220 pages of his work, which is still the fundamental monograph on this subject. In twelve chapters he discusses Dirk’s life and writings in chronological order.

According to a contemporary, Dirk received his education in the monastery of the Lesser Brothers (Franciscans) in Leeuwarden. Pieter Houtzager, a messenger from Jan Matthijs, baptized Dirk before February 2,

1535. More than twenty-five years later Dirk will call Houtzager God's messenger, one who preached the Word of God and baptized him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The reasons for Dirk's brother Obbe's later resignation, baptism, and ordination by the false prophets of Münster remain for Dirk scriptural and binding. Upon request of the brethren, Obbe ordained Dirk as a fellow elder in Appingendam in 1534 or 1535. Ten Doornkaat Koolman agrees with the majority of Mennonite scholars that neither Obbe nor Dirk got involved in the turbulent events around the apocalyptic kingdom of Münster. Since some evidence points in a different direction, especially Obbe's confession, more research on this period is needed.

In 1537 both Dirk and Menno and other Anabaptists were in East Friesland, where Count Enno was governor. When Enno died in 1540, his widow Anna van Oldenburg came more and more under the influence of the Reformed stream, and called John à Lasco as the new leader of the church of East Friesland. His debates with Menno are well known. Ten Doornkaat Koolman assumes that Dirk was a close co-worker with Menno at this time, that he probably was present at these confrontations, and that he might even have been Menno's secretary. Under pressure from Brussels and from the emperor, the Anabaptists were expelled in 1544, and both Menno and Dirk headed for the Rhineland. In the 1540s Dirk continued in the background. While Menno risked his life traveling to Friesland, Holland, and Groningen, Dirk apparently stayed behind.

In contrast to Wilhelm Kühler, who argues that in the 1550s Dirk outgrew Menno and even opposed him where he thought it necessary, ten Doornkaat Koolman points out that in the 1550s Menno could call Dirk "our trusted and very beloved brother." In the confrontation with Adam Pastor, Dirk played a prominent role. It became clear in the 1550s that Dirk was more concise and more strict than Menno. For example, he supported radical shunning of those banned from the fellowship of believers. His importance increases when he becomes a writer around 1554. With his growing recognition and authority, he now takes his own stand on many important issues and does not hesitate to oppose Menno on the application of the ban.

Dirk moved further east in the same decade, living in Wismar, Lübeck, and then Danzig, where he was an elder in the 1560s. In this period he writes prolifically and becomes the most respected leader of the Anabaptist movement

in the Netherlands, northern Germany, and Danzig. As leader and elder Menno did his most creative work in the late 1530s and '40s; in the '50s one of his major concerns was the elimination from his early writings of any evidence of his involvement with the Münsterites. Dirk now takes over the leadership from Menno; as a writer he works mostly on the same issues. The monophysite Christology, the spiritual resurrection, the ban, the ordinances of the church, zeal for the purity of the church, and the presence of the kingdom of God among us now are also his chief concerns. Like Menno and most of the reformers, Dirk was convinced that his teaching and interpretation of scripture was correct and irrefutable. As an elder he took a firm stand on the Frisian-Flemish controversy and can be blamed at least in part for the great schism.

For Dirk, the Anabaptist movement is the great turning point in the history of the Christian church: it has now been liberated from the Babylonian captivity of Roman Catholicism. The fellowship of the believers is already the New Jerusalem. Dirk did not care that this true church was small and insignificant: Christ had predicted that only a few would enter the narrow gate and find the path to eternal life. But this true church had to be of one spirit and of one faith, otherwise it would not stand. To keep the church united and pure, the strict ban was indispensable. Ten Doornkaat Koolman admits that Dirk's role in the great schism throws a shadow over his life, yet he did guide many with his literary works and strengthen their faith.

Keeney and Snyder have produced a translation that reads easily and is concise. But by breaking up the author's long and complicated sentences and paragraphs, some of the meaning and content can be lost. An illustration is the third sentence of page one: where ten Doornkaat Koolman questions a statement, in the translation he confirms it. These details are issues only for scholarly research. For the student and the informed reader this translation is a great contribution. Since very few people read Dutch, it provides the English-speaking world access to the life and works of one of the major leaders of early Anabaptism.

HELMUT ISAAK, Abbotsford, BC

Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed. *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People and Those Who Love Them*. Gaithersburg, MD: Chi Ro Press, 1998.

Stanley J. Grenz. *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Robert L. Brawley, ed. *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Many reviews address whether a book respects the canons of its field of scholarship, makes a novel contribution, or effectively reaffirms some traditional argument or set of values. My approach to three books on homosexuality or gay/lesbian subject matter (the very choice of label can flag a taking of sides) is likewise based on criteria I consider important amid the anguished debating.

Certainly the more common criteria for judging books are valid. And in approaching these books I have kept in mind such typical concerns as whether the argumentation is sound, the writing competent, the material coherent. But other standards seem to me pertinent here, for two key reasons. First, many debaters already know by heart the common positions and how they are justified. Why then set out yet again to argue that here is the preferred position, or to tell how this or that book fails to take the most biblical stance? Second, my own journey has brought me to this point. Once I was pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church. This Mennonite congregation, the oldest in North America, was in 1997 disfellowshipped by Franconia Conference, a regional Mennonite association of churches, due to the church's gay/lesbian-friendly stance. By that time my Germantown pastorate was long past, and I watched at some distance but with dismay as debaters, often alienated, angry, and anguished, found no way to stitch together an outcome that both respected their differences and nurtured continuing relationships.

I watched not only as one with personal memories of earlier stages of the process but also as a researcher studying for dissertation purposes the debate's closing phases. As its title suggests, the dissertation, "Fractured Dance: Steps and Missteps in Conversation and in Application of Gadamer to a Mennonite Debate on Homosexuality," pursued through the work of Hans Georg-Gadamer its own criteria for evaluating the conversation.

The key goal was to investigate from a Gadamerian standpoint what makes communication across differences successful and to seek instances of success or failure in conversations conducted by three clusters of Franconia delegates prior to the final Germantown decision. I was drawn to Gadamer through sensing connections between his views and the Anabaptist commitment to peacemaking – as well as Paul’s vision in 1 Cor. 12-13 of a body of Christ which must learn to love its many different parts as all contributing to one body. Leaving aside the many complexities inherent in Gadamer’s thought, I’ll focus on this key point: *My ability to grasp why your position is persuasive to you, and vice-versa, is what enables the true understanding which defines conversational success.*

Gadamer believes that as we seek to understand another we must always begin through the lenses of our own biases and prejudices. We have no way to get outside ourselves to see in some neutral or objective way what’s “really there.” We can only start from how we see as a result of who we uniquely are as shaped by culture and experience, and Gadamer wants us to treasure our initial perspectives as our only way of beginning to perceive each other.

But Gadamer then asks us to risk having these initial stances enlarged by placing them in contact with other views. He asks me to converse with your prejudices, and you with mine, so profoundly and genuinely that little by little we see why the other’s position seems right to her or him. Success doesn’t require fully agreeing with each other, but it does demand our entering the other’s position deeply enough to sense why the other person holds it and why it deserves our respect and readiness to learn from it. My main job, then, was to look in the Franconia conversations for instances of readiness to risk one’s own prejudices and to value and be enlarged by other prejudices. Let the often sobering conclusions remain in the dissertation, even as the underlying quest now provides the criteria I apply also to these three books.

I conclude that two of them – *From Wounded Hearts* and *Welcoming but Not Affirming* – are helpful in clarifying the prejudices being held even as their authors are perhaps less interested in modeling how prejudices might be risked. Meanwhile *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality* tends to generate the same assessment if treated chapter by chapter, but if taken as a whole it helps illustrate what risking of prejudices can look like and why such risking can be valuable.

Hearts is a treasure trove of narratives divided into three sections fulfilling the promise of the book's subtitle. The first and largest section focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (hereafter "LGBT") experiences; in remaining sections, parents and then "families and friends" tell their stories. The book's key prejudice is summarized in the "Publisher's Note" by R. Adam Debaugh, who suggests to the reader that "if you have doubts about the place of God's sexual minority children in the scheme of things, this book might help" (xvii). Story after story shows the pain a judgmental church has inflicted on the teller or loved ones. Implicit in most accounts is a hope that the reader, identifying with the teller, will come to see that here is a human being who deserves the same full acceptance the church gives straight Christians.

In contrast, Stanley Grenz's prejudice is that the appropriate "evangelical response to homosexuality" is indeed to be "welcoming but not affirming." What this means is that all – LGBT or straight – are equally welcome in the "discipleship community," but disciples will join "on God's terms, not their own." And God's terms demand that the community always welcome the homosexual while not affirming those "old sinful practices" homosexuals are called to "leave behind" (157).

Despite their nearly opposing stances, each book does contribute to one significant ingredient of Gadamerian communication: The other person's prejudice must be made available in as persuasive and rich a form as possible. This then gives the holder of a different prejudice potential access to what makes the prejudice under study valuable and convincing to the one holding it. Both books provide a well-defined, attractively delineated path for walking into what makes these stances persuasive to those who treasure them. *Hearts* welcomes us into, precisely, the warmly beating hearts of those speaking. If in more cerebral style, *Welcoming* invites us, through generally fair and careful reasoning, to understand why Grenz thinks that the appropriate evangelical and biblical position is his own.

Each book also makes some effort to risk its own central prejudice at least sufficiently to acknowledge the potential integrity and value of opposing prejudices. Amid comment on sexuality as a central challenge faced by Christians in a "permissive society," Grenz notes that "because the challenge is one we all face, whether 'straight' or 'gay,' we best face it together" (156). And

Kreider poignantly articulates her effort to see value in two very different sets of prejudices:

I feel caught in the middle! I very deeply love and care for each of you and do not want to hurt you in any way. It has been very comfortable to walk along together, affirming and encouraging one another without many major conflicts. Truly it is good when God's people dwell in peace! But when I am ready to say, "Let's just keep it that way," then I immediately see the faces of our many gay and lesbian friends and their parents. (266-67)

However, neither book shows significant evidence of readiness to risk its own prejudice, as opposed to the meaningful yet less challenging effort to value or respect another prejudice. Each book is largely committed to its own stance. There is much reasonable concern for opposing stances, but these are not primarily viewed as potential sources for enlarging the writer's own prejudice. Rather, the writer's bias is in the end what is cherished.

This is generally the pattern as well in *Biblical Ethics*, whose nine chapters by different authors provide a sampling of viewpoints presented at a largely Presbyterian Consultation on Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality held at McCormick Theological Seminary in 1995. The most scholarly of the three books, in handling prejudices *Biblical Ethics* nevertheless encompasses roughly the same moves as the other two volumes. Most of the chapter writers skillfully express a clear prejudice, again helping readers enter the force of a writer's reasoning and why the author finds it persuasive. For instance, Ulrich Mauser carefully explains why he views maleness and femaleness as grounded in the basic order of God's creation itself and why this leads him to view homosexual conduct as the "denial that the human being is good as God's creature in the polarity of being male or female. In one form or another, homosexual conduct fears or denies, despises or ridicules, the goodness of God's creation of male and female" (13). J. Andrew Dearman appears to head in a similar direction in his treatment of "Marriage in the Old Testament."

Then take Elizabeth Gordon Edwards. Her bias regarding the Apostle Paul's understanding of the flesh or body is clear: "Redeeming Paul's use of *sarx* is a futile task; an abortion is required" (69). A more body-affirming (and implicitly LGBT-friendly) "ability to proclaim the blessing of our sexuality as a

God-given gift” is needed (82). Herman C. Waetjen and Dale B. Martin articulate their own LGBT-friendly prejudices. Waetjen treats the gay-straight “binary” as part of a “pollution system” (114) cleaving humans into clean and unclean that the gospel has overcome.

The occasional rhetorical nod toward opposing prejudices may be found. But the writers remain largely interested in articulating their own biases, not in risky exploration of how an alternate one might enlarge their own. Nevertheless, the effect of placing all these prejudices under the cover of one book is powerful. At the level of the entire work, as these contrasting biases jostle against each other, each is placed at risk, shown potentially to need the perspective it may itself tend to deny or minimize. Editor Robert L. Brawley seems aware of this. He reports that participants in the consultation “affirm with deep respect for one another the value of our dialogue. Significantly, this profound respect comes not from avoiding our differences but through confronting them” (153). Highlighting the polarization afflicting conversations on homosexuality, Brawley notes that

Debates from such opposite extremes leave little room for negotiation. In the midst of varieties of methods [such as of biblical interpretation], social locations, and plays for power, the multi-vocality of the dialogue in our Consultation has broadened the vision of us all. (154)

I write here for a journal circulated among Anabaptists afflicted by their own opposite extremes. No peaceful way forward seems yet in sight. Yet perhaps treating viewpoints as they have been treated here, as means to grasp the multi-vocality of our dialogue in the quest for a broadening of all our visions, is one productive way to proceed.

MICHAEL A. KING, Telford, PA

George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit. Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998.

This is the latest book in a projected series from the Gospel and our Culture Network, a network attempting to “foster the missional encounter of the gospel with North American culture.” Hunsberger is coordinator of this network and professor of missiology at Western Theological Seminary in Michigan.

To facilitate a missional encounter in a pluralistic world, a theology of cultural plurality is needed. According to this book, such a theology is not a reflection on the religious nature of culture but is, rather, a theological response to culture and to the plurality of cultures in the world. Hunsberger prefers the word “plurality” to “pluralism,” because the latter implies “a certain form of commitment to the pluriformity” (12), while the former simply speaks of pluralism as a fact. Serious reflection about the intersection of gospel and culture is also needed as the church lives with renewed awareness within the pluralism of cultures and religions that surround us. Hunsberger believes that a solid framework for such reflection is already present in the thought, experience, and writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Drawing our attention to this resource is a gift from Hunsberger to the church.

Hunsberger gives four reasons why Newbigin’s contribution provides a solid basis for considering questions of gospel and culture. First, is his missionary career that has immersed him in a culturally plural world. Second is his extensive participation in public debate about these issues. Third, he has consistently reflected on a theological understanding of cultural plurality. And fourth, in his debating process he has in effect created a theology of cultural plurality.

Hunsberger methodically analyzes Newbigin’s writings, a literary contribution of over 260 pieces that cover about fifty years of missionary experience and reflection. As a missionary in India, Newbigin dealt with questions about the authority of the church to engage in mission. Upon his return to England he had to deal with questions about the authority of the church to have faith. These two questions, suggests Hunsberger, continue to underlie our own contemporary debates about the appropriateness of the

proclamation of a particular faith and the invitation to a particular mission within cultural plurality.

Hunsberger examines Newbigin's thought about the really tough issues involved in inter-cultural and inter-religious mission. Is cross-cultural mission valid? What are the forms that church unity must take? What is the basis of inter-religious dialogue? Newbigin's framework for answering these questions is both surprising and predictable. Much of his understanding of the role of particularity within cultural plurality is based on the biblical doctrine of election. This is a surprise for most, yet it is this emphasis that makes dialogue and particularity both necessary and authoritative. He also points to issues of history and eschatology, the communal implications of conversion, and the gospel as "secular announcement" to the world. Newbigin suggests that interreligious dialogue and particularity within plurality must ultimately be understood according to the triangular relationships among gospel, church, and culture.

Hunsberger identifies three important contributions of Newbigin's work for theology within cultural plurality. First, it "enables churches to engage their own culture in a missionary way" (278). Second, it gives to churches "powerful resources for the inner dialogue in which they must be engaged" (279). Third, "Newbigin's vision nourishes congregations toward their calling to be the hermeneutic of the gospel, the interpretive lens through which people will see and read what this gospel has to do with them and the world in which they live" (279).

Hunsberger's book is timely and encouraging, though at times one feels that things could be stated more succinctly and that repetition could be eliminated. But these weaknesses are also strengths. Hunsberger desires to communicate carefully and thoroughly the thought of Newbigin. The book demonstrates Hunsberger's integrity in subjecting himself to the thought of another, and even in areas of potential disagreement he allows Newbigin to speak without biasing the perspective. It is inspiring to see how "outdated" material continues to be "contemporary" and relevant. I recommend this book to college and seminary classes, to missiologically minded persons, and to those wishing to think carefully about the role of particular faith witness within cultural plurality.

ROBERT J. SUDERMAN, Winnipeg, MB

Roland H. Worth, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Its Old Testament Roots*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997.

The purpose of this book is narrower than the title suggests. Worth wants to demonstrate that Jesus' teachings in the so-called six antitheses of Matt. 5:17-48 do not contradict the teachings of the Old Testament. He believes that this is important in order to sustain his understanding that Jesus must uphold the Jewish Law during his lifetime, because the Law continues to be valid until Jesus' death (his understanding of "until all is accomplished," v.18). This allows Worth to contrast Jesus' supposed strict adherence to the Law to Paul's later insistence that the Law is no longer binding on Jesus' followers (45ff).

The book's first two chapters set out the problem and give a brief description of scholarship on it. The next two chapters explain in greater detail his understanding of 5:17-20 as the context for the antitheses, and provide a brief commentary on other places in the gospels where Jesus might be seen to be either advocating or actually breaking the Torah. Worth uses the old standby argument of "intent" vs. "letter", which allows him to interpret the Law in such a way that Jesus is not actually breaking its "intent." Unfortunately, in doing so Worth denigrates the religious leaders of Jesus' day for their "well-intended but misguided human accretions to the divine law" (73). These accretions are, of course, of a completely different character from the human accretion which this book entails. Worth's denigration of the Pharisees should also be noted (55-57), especially since his bibliography cites books which should correct his bias (Neusner, E. P. Sanders). These types of arguments tend to preserve rather than combat anti-Semitic bias in parts of Christian thought.

The heart of the book (chs. 5-11) is a careful study of the six antitheses. In each case, the goal is to find OT parallels to the "but I say to you" part of the antithesis. The final chapter may be of particular interest to Mennonite readers, as it deals with non-violence.

Worth begins it by giving a detailed interpretation of Matt. 5:38-42, Jesus' commands to turn the other cheek, give your cloak, and go the second mile. His understanding of "turn the other cheek" limits it primarily to judicial settings, with secondary application to everyday life situations (235-43). While Worth does see here a "repudiation of the central attitudes of the Zealot-type movements," he regards this as "an indirect consequence of (Jesus') teaching,

rather than its central thrust or purpose” (243). Having decided on the (only?) correct understanding of Jesus’ commands, Worth then goes on to find OT parallels in Job 16:10, Lamentations 3:28-30, and Isaiah 50:6. While the final text is used only as a possible background for the attitude of the Messiah, Worth congratulates himself on having found “two prophetic texts that advocate nonretaliatory conduct and that could have been easily in (Jesus’) mind when he spoke his antithesis” (254).

This section reveals the limits of the author’s study. His parallels only work if his is the correct interpretation (or human accretion?) of these commands. If, for example, we would choose to interpret 5:39 in light of 5:43, the command to love our enemies, and thus to see it as a command to non-violent resistance in general, then Worth’s passages fail to provide the parallels necessary to prove his case. Further, his initial concern was whether or not Jesus’ teachings contradict the Prophets or the Torah (4). None of his passages is from the Torah, the Job and Lamentation texts are not “prophetic” (in the Hebrew Bible these books are part of the Writings, not the Prophets).

In general, Worth employs a number of presuppositions that detract from his argument. First, he wishes to show that Jesus is “bringing the people back to the original intents (sic) of the ancient sacred works” (30). While concern with original intent was certainly a normative position in the twentieth century, it was not part of the method of textual interpretation in Jesus’ day. It is anachronistic at best to show Jesus’ superiority to rabbinic teaching on the basis of a method of interpretation that neither would have recognized. Second, Worth appears to believe that there is complete continuity and agreement within the early church. He does not allow for the possibility that Matthew’s position regarding the relationship between Jesus and the Law might be quite different than that of Mark, Paul, or James. While he may be right on this issue (though I think that unlikely), it would need to be proven not assumed.

Third, the author generally ignores the possibility that Matthew had an influence upon the wording of the Sermon on the Mount. While Worth has read many authors who would disagree with his position, he treats their ideas with “major skepticism” (4) rather than counter-argument. He attempts to get around this problem by claiming to be concerned with “the meaning of the text in the form that we have it today,” but later goes on to speak about “Jesus’ listeners” (21) as historical rather than textual persons. Fourth, Worth assumes

that the New Testament's picture of Messiah was a prescriptive norm which the Messiah had to follow (72). Yet clearly the NT writers spent considerable energy redefining "Messiah" for their audience, in order to fit Jesus into the definition. This is one of the key themes of the book of Mark. Our Christian picture of what a "Messiah" should be is largely based on a retrospective position which assumes that Messiah = Jesus. It is a picture which begins with Jesus and reads him back into the Old Testament. (This is well within the rules of the day for "correct" biblical interpretation but does not fit with our "original intent" rules.) Worth would have us believe that Jesus is following a course laid down by the OT writers.

These four questionable presuppositions make it difficult to find Worth's overall argument valuable. They are also fundamental to his overall plan, making it hard to read around them in order to find more general insight. Worth's bibliography, nevertheless, is extensive and wide-ranging, and hundreds of notes enhance the arguments, although their placement at the end of each chapter make them less useful than they might have been.

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