



# **The Conrad Grebel Review**

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## Foreword

We are pleased to present in this Winter 2006 issue a sampling of papers from the second Shi'ah Muslim – Mennonite Christian Dialogue, a conference conducted in Iran in 2004 on the theme of “Revelation and Authority.” The four papers selected for this issue – two from Mennonites, two from Muslims – are introduced by A. James Reimer, the event organizer. Papers from the previous conference in the series, held in 2002 with “The Challenge of Modernity” as its theme, are found in *CGR* 21.3 (Fall 2003).

We are equally pleased to publish two other thought-provoking articles in this issue, one on Anthony Bartlett's theological concept of “abyssal compassion,” the other on the unique view of Anabaptist history found in Luther Blisset's *Q*. A diverse array of book reviews rounds out our offerings.

The Spring issue 2006 will focus on John Howard Yoder as historian and will also include the 2005 Eby Lecture by Hildi Froese Tiessen. The Fall 2006 issue will feature papers on the Lord's Supper. We have interesting plans for future issues as well. Meanwhile, we are working on a significant upgrade of *CGR*'s presence on the web.

As always, we invite submissions and subscriptions. Please check the information on the inside cover pages of this issue.

C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*  
Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

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*Cover Photograph of Muslim and Mennonite scholars at 2004 event courtesy of A. James Reimer.*

## REVELATION and AUTHORITY

### **Shi'ah Muslim – Mennonite Christian Dialogue II**

#### INTRODUCTION

*A. James Reimer*

Qom, known as the most “religious” city of Iran, was the location of phase two of an academic Shi’ite Muslim–Mennonite Christian dialogue held February 15-16, 2004, as part of a two-week visit. Eight North American Mennonites joined a similar number of Muslim scholars for an intensive but cordial two-day discussion at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, on the topic of “Revelation and Authority.” This unusual scholarly interchange of ideas is the culmination of an exchange program between Mennonites and Iranian Muslims, initiated by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Imam Khomeini Institute in 1997. This exchange was the consequence of MCC’s relief work after a severe 1990 earthquake in Iran. As part of the exchange the two institutions sponsor a Mennonite couple living and studying in Qom (Matthew and Laurie Pierce) and two Iranian doctoral students studying at the Toronto School of Theology (Mohammad Farimani and Yousef Daneshvar). The Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) helps to oversee the academic aspect of the exchange in Toronto and co-organizes the dialogue with the Khomeini Institute.

Phase one of the dialogue, sponsored by TMTC, MCC and the Khomeini Institute, took place in Toronto in October 2002. The topic was “Muslims, Christians and the Challenges of Modernity.” Four Iranian scholars, including a translator, flew in from Iran to Toronto for that event. Their stay comprised not only intellectual discussions but also visits to a Mennonite church service in Tavistock, Ontario, a modest Old Order Mennonite Farm, an upscale Niagara Mennonite home, and Niagara Falls. Proceedings were published in *CGR* 21.3 (Fall 2003).

For the 2004 event a group of North American Mennonite scholars were invited to Iran, and were treated to typical Iranian hospitality and generosity over a two-week period, February 11–22, under the leadership of Professor Aboulhassan Haghani of the Khomeini Institute. This was religiously and politically a propitious time for such a visit, given both the 25th anniversary

celebrations in Teheran of the 1979 Islamic revolution on February 11 (the day of our arrival), and the elections for Parliament on February 20. Our group was probably the only Western delegation to be ushered into the stands to observe the 25th anniversary celebrations, together with politicians, Muslim clerics, representatives from various religious groups, media and other dignitaries to see the parachutes, fireworks, musical and oral tributes, and to listen to the President of Iran. An estimated two million people were reportedly on the streets of Teheran that day. At the end of our visit, on election day, two of us were briefly allowed into a polling booth to observe the carefully monitored and orderly voting procedure.

The Khomeini Institute paid the entire cost of our stay. We took tours of a prisoner of war camp that is now a museum, the former American Embassy grounds, palaces of the former Shahs and the simple dwelling of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. We visited beautiful Kashan with its lavish pre-revolutionary homes, and Esfahan with its seventeenth-century square and market, exquisite ancient mosques, the old Armenian Christian Church, and the Zoroastrian “Temple of Fire.” Particularly memorable was the home of the late Murtada Mutahhari, an Islamic thinker whose many volumes are now being published as collected works. Drafter of the constitution of the Islamic Republic and personal confidante of Ayatollah Khomeini, he was assassinated three months after the revolution.

Conference participants were carefully chosen. Most of the Muslim scholars had received doctorates from Western universities—McGill, Canada; Manchester, England; Innsbruck, Austria. With the exception of Yousef Daneshvar, Muslim participants were professors at the Khomeini Institute. The Christian participants all had some knowledge of Islam, some like David Shenk, Jon Hoover (Cairo), and Roy Hange having spent much of their professional careers studying and writing about Islam and Christianity. Christian participants from TMTCC were professors A. James Reimer and Lydia Harder, and students Phil Enns and Susan Harrison. Ed Martin, Director of MCC’s Central and Southern Asian Program, and Matthew and Laurie Pierce also participated. In this issue of *CGR* we are publishing four representative papers from among those presented at the event, two from each side of the dialogue.

Themes in the formal presentations included revelation, reason, authority, law, conscience, canonical texts, religious experience, and Islamic and Christian views of God. The dominant motif was the relation of revelation to reason.

Islam sees no fundamental contradiction between a high view of human reason (a gift from God) and a high view of revelation (the divine will as revealed through Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammad in the Qur'an). This is related to the positive Islamic anthropology: human beings are naturally oriented toward the divine. The Christian doctrine of original sin, which has corrupted human nature, including reason, and requires a sacrificial atonement, has no equivalent in Islamic theology.

The Qur'an does mention the forbidden eating from a tree that has negative consequences for Adam and Eve, but it is not identified as the tree of the "knowledge of good and evil" as in Genesis 3. Rather, the knowledge of good and evil is not negative but a positive, natural knowledge planted within the human conscience by God. All human beings have a tendency to sin, but this is not an inherited condition. While human beings are not perfect, there is no excuse; God expects them to use their reason fully in determining right and wrong, and to follow the path of obedience. God is ready to forgive directly those who repent, without any need for sacrificial mediation. In their high view of reason, freedom and human responsibility and their rejection of the more severe Protestant notions of original sin, Mennonite Christians have something in common with Shi'ite Muslims.

Most remarkable in the course of the dialogue was the respect that both sides showed toward each other's texts. Both have a high view of the authority of the sacred book—one reason that the theme "Revelation and Authority" was chosen. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was professor Hossein Tofiqhi, who has taught Christianity to Muslim students for some forty years. He knows the four gospels from memory and referred to Jesus as "our Lord Jesus Christ" on a number of occasions. That expression does not imply the divinity of Jesus but does express the respect Muslims have for Jesus as a great prophet. There are, of course, substantive and methodological differences in how Muslims and Christians interpret their respective texts.

Apparent throughout our discussions was an increasing level of trust between our two communities of learning. Pivotal to this trust is the sincerity of the dialogue, the common search for truth, and the firm conviction that the life of the intellect must not be separated from devotion, piety and moral integrity. This was mentioned a number of times and in the concluding session

with the head of the Khomeini Institute, Ayatollah Mesbah, who belongs to the 70-member elected Council of Experts responsible for choosing and overseeing the Grand Leader of Iran. He has the ear of the Grand Leader and gives his official sanction to the Mennonite-Shi'ite dialogue.

In his closing address Ayatollah Mesbah called on all religions to join forces against secularism and the decay of moral values, especially among the youth. "We sense a growing spirit of community and solidarity between us as we together search for truth and greater faithfulness and righteousness," I said in response. "We sincerely hope that our exchange and the community of trust that we have already developed may continue to grow and be a sign of hope for much greater mutual understanding between our two traditions and also between our countries." We presented Ayatollah Mesbah with the three-volume *History of Mennonites in Canada* by Frank H. Epp, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* by Ted Regehr, and the Fall 2003 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

## II

My involvement in inter-faith dialogue began with considerable resistance on my part. My own field is Christian theology, and although I believed theology must include an empathetic engagement with all Christians, all faiths, and all peoples, I did not have a serious interest in entering new arenas of scholarly pursuit. This has changed in recent years as I have encountered Shi'ite Muslims from Iran. This exchange has altered the way I do theology: what I thought was the periphery has changed the center.

The purpose of these dialogues is to promote mutual understanding and mutual conversion. I don't mean conversion of Muslims to Christianity, let alone Anabaptism, or Christians to the Islamic faith (though that could be a legitimate agenda in other contexts), but rather through a mutual encounter to convert one another to a deeper understanding and commitment to one's own faith, to aspects of one's tradition that have perhaps been overlooked.

I will give an example from each side. Yousef Daneshvar once said to me, "You Mennonites are such good and pious people, but why do I never see you pray?" I could have given him the usual, mundane answer: "We don't pray openly and publicly like you do; we pray quietly and unceasingly." But at

that moment I realized a fundamental truth. As Mennonites we have concentrated so intently on living upright moral lives that we have frequently undervalued the spiritual roots of all righteous living. I began taking more seriously my personal life of contemplative and liturgical prayer. A Muslim had reminded me—converted me—to something in my own tradition that I had either lost or forgotten. On the other side, our Muslim friends have so often heard Mennonites stress the importance of nonviolence, peace and reconciliation that, I believe, they have come to reread the Qur’an with a new eye to its message of peace.

This openness to each other’s tradition can be firmly founded only if it is justified on grounds intrinsic to one’s own religious beliefs and texts. I am astounded at how generously the Qur’an can be interpreted with respect to other religions, and I have been struck anew at the embracing, inclusive attitude of biblical texts toward other all peoples.

### III

What follows are some observations about the rationale for our dialogue, and the differences and similarities in our approaches. First, we are engaged in a common search for *truth* that lies beyond either tradition. Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic and universalistic; they both affirm a belief in one divine agent, the one universal truth that underlies and grounds all of reality, visible and invisible. Both recognize the fallibility of all human understanding. This recognition and the constant yearning to know more fully the complete truth is a rationale for dialogue.

Second, Islam has a strong sense of the absolute *transcendence* of God and a profound fear of idolatry. This is why Mohammad the prophet is not considered divine; he is an ordinary human being who became a vehicle for divine revelation. Here Christians, particularly Mennonites, who take so seriously the teachings of the *human* Jesus have something to learn. Western thought, including theology, has since the time of the Enlightenment lost the sense of transcendence. The human Jesus has often been deified, without recognition that the fight of the early Christians against heresies was an attempt to maintain the transcendent mystery of the one God. While they believed in the deity of Christ, they were careful to formulate this deity in such a way as

to avoid blasphemous claims about the human Jesus. It was Jesus as the Christ that was God. We could well stand to be reminded of the radical transcendence of the divine.

Ethics is the third point of comparison. Here perhaps we have the greatest affinity with the Shi'ites. We have a common trait: *strong moral-ethical consciousness*. This takes on somewhat different forms but nevertheless there is mutual recognition of the importance of holding belief and morality, spirituality and ethics together. The reason that such an exceptional bond of mutual respect has developed between the two sets of scholars is that both groups consider the intellectual endeavour inseparable from righteous living and a concern for global humanity.

Fourth, both value the importance of *reason* in the life of faith. This claim may surprise some Mennonites; surely we have not emphasized the role of the intellect, philosophy, and speculative thought nearly to the degree that Muslims have. While this is true, there is within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition an appreciation of rational knowledge as an occasion of faith, reflected in how we view adult baptism and the Lord's Supper. Only when young adults have reached the age of rational accountability can they make a knowledgeable decision of faith and join the church. What has been lacking is serious reflection on the relation of reason to faith and spirituality.

Fifth, for both traditions the *sacred text* is authoritative and viewed as revelatory. True, there are substantive and methodological differences in how Muslims and Christians interpret their respective texts. Muslims manage to achieve a much greater consensus on the fundamental meanings of the Qur'anic text than do Christians in their interpretation of the Bible. Rather than applying the western tools of historical-criticism to the Qur'an, Muslims "let the text stand" as God's literal, revealed Word, and then find a rich variety of mystical and spiritual levels of meaning in it. For Christians, the ultimate revelation of God is personal—the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus the Christ. The Bible is revelatory in its attesting to this incarnation. For Muslims the text itself is the explicit, direct revelation of Allah.

Sixth, Muslims and Mennonite Christians share a common hope in the coming of the *Kingdom of God* on earth. The Muslims' twelfth Imam, Imam Ali, who they believe never died but disappeared mysteriously and is hidden at the moment, will reappear together with Jesus to set up an eternal kingdom

of justice on earth. This kingdom is a penultimate reality. After this comes the final judgment, heaven and hell. Where Mennonites and Muslims disagree is how to achieve this kingdom of God on earth. Unlike Mennonites, most of whom have historically been suspicious of the role of the state in bringing about such a kingdom, Muslims hold that it is through an earthly government that the conditions may be prepared for the coming of the twelfth Imam.

This brings us to a seventh comparison, an anthropological one. Mennonites have historically waffled on the question of original sin, parting company with mainline Protestants on the precise nature of sin and human freedom. While Luther and Calvin both emphasized the depravity and bondage of human nature, and consequently espoused predestination, the Anabaptists and subsequent Mennonites held that human nature had not totally fallen and that some freedom remained—the freedom to respond to God’s grace. This had profound implications for ethics; human beings were expected, under the power of the Holy Spirit, to obey divine commands. This optimism about human nature finds some commonality with the Muslims. The fundamental difference is in the role of sacrifice and atonement. Jesus, according to the Qur’an, did not die as a sacrifice for human sinfulness. Rather, humans have direct access to God and God’s forgiveness. Mennonites, on the other hand, have historically sided with the mainline traditions in affirming the atoning and sacrificial work of Christ. In short, Muslims have an even more optimistic anthropology than do Mennonites.

The eighth and final comparison is that of *community*. Both groups stress the importance of community over against rugged individualism. This was dramatically illustrated in our 2002 dialogue when several of us visited an Older Order Mennonite family north of Waterloo. Invited by the Mennonite farmer inside his modest home, and sitting in a circle around the couple with their two small children, the Muslims asked, “Why do you not have electric lights?” The Old Order answer: “Because that’s what our church teaches.” This surprised and delighted the visitors; here in the midst of modern, western, North American culture, with its decadent individualism, was an example of simple life and objective communal authority taking precedence over individual beliefs. Our Muslim brothers and sisters can remind us of something valuable in our own heritage: communal ties increasingly threatened by an individualistic consumerist society.

May we be as open to the Muslims as they have been to us. At our final session in Qom, one of us asked whether we could end in prayer. Ayatollah Mesbah replied: “Of course, you pray, and we’ll say ‘Amen’.” That’s the spirit in which we want to continue our experiment in mutual understanding and conversion.<sup>1</sup>

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> This introduction is an edited adaptation of my “Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Iran” in *TMTC Newsletter*; Vol. 12, No. 1 (October 2004), and “Mennonite-Christian and Shi’ite-Muslim Dialogue: An Experiment in Mutual Understanding,” in *MCC Peace Office Newsletter*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January-March 2006).

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*A. James Reimer is a professor at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, ON and was the director of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre when this conference was conducted.*

# Revelation, Law, and Individual Conscience

*A. James Reimer*

## **Introduction**

The first phase of our Shi'ah Muslim-Mennonite Christian Dialogue took place in October 2002 in Toronto. The focus was on "The Challenge of Modernity" for our two respective religious minority groups. (See the Fall 2003 issue of *CGR* for a selection of papers.) We discovered some remarkable affinities between us even though we come from historically divided religious traditions. These affinities are sharpened perhaps by the fact that Shi'ah Muslims might be portrayed as the radical wing of the Islamic tradition and Mennonites as the radical wing of the Christian tradition. What the two have in common are strong moral-ethical convictions. For Mennonites, to be Christian means a radical form of discipleship, following quite literally the life, teachings, and example of Jesus, including the way of nonviolent love, justice, peace, and reconciliation. There appears, on the surface at least, to be another common element between us: a strong, uncompromising critique of the western liberal tradition. The Old Order Amish, Old Order Mennonite, and Hutterites are but three examples. Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites are the most obvious instances of religious orders that distinguish themselves visibly from larger western society in dress, in the rejection of electricity in some cases, and in the renunciation of other forms of modern western technology. Historically, the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage has been characterized, perhaps most of all, by its conservative communalism.

In this second dialogue, held in Qom, Iran in February 2004, we looked at the concepts of revelation and authority in our two traditions. In the essay below, I examine Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Anabaptist) views of revelation, law, and individual conscience, and compare them with Shi'ite Muslim notions. In the course of this study I find surprising commonalities between Anabaptist and Thomistic thought that might serve as a point of departure for Mennonite and Shi'ite Muslim dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

Mennonites have their origin in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe, closely connected with the peasant revolts occurring

particularly in southern Germany, Bavaria, and northern Italy. Sociologically speaking, whereas Roman Catholics tended to side with the old aristocratic and imperial forces, Lutherans with the more progressive princes, and Calvinists with the rising middle classes, Radicals such as the Anabaptists identified with the peasants and small artisans. With the defeat of the peasant cause for territorial social, economic, and religious reform, including greater participation in local politics, a new understanding of church and religious community gradually evolved. This new community, sometimes referred to as the “free church” (non-territorial), was defined no longer by automatic inclusion through infant baptism but by voluntary membership based on individual conscience and free choice, signified outwardly by adult baptism. Although entrance into the community was based on such free, non-coerced adult decision, once the choice had been made, a strong communal ethic set in. Hutterites, or the Moravian Anabaptists, were the most consistent Anabaptists in this regard, practising a form of “Christian Communism” biblically based on Acts 2, where the earliest Christians are described as having “everything in common.”<sup>2</sup>

What may be most interesting in this regard is the role of individual conscience in the early Anabaptist communities and in subsequent Mennonite history. Insiders and outsiders of the Mennonite community frequently argue that modern western notions of freedom of conscience and religion, pluralism, and toleration have their origins in the so-called “left wing of the Reformation.” If these concepts did not originate with the sixteenth-century radicals, at least the radicals gave them a strong historical impetus. To the extent that they did so, it might be argued—despite the anti-modern appearance of the Old Orders—that the Anabaptists and other Reformation radicals not only anticipated but helped to bring about modern western understandings of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, pluralism, tolerance and, consequently, western views of individual rights, equality, and justice. However, this is an oversimplification of Anabaptist-Mennonite history, even though I have made similar observations in some of my own writings (as a matter of self-criticism, not applause).

A positive view of the modernizing role of our tradition is held by David W. Shenk, a participant in our dialogue. He has made a case for the Anabaptist contribution to personal freedom, the development of later western European

religious freedom and pluralistic culture, and finally modern democracy and its so-called commitment to human rights and freedoms.<sup>3</sup> The influential Mennonite scholar and churchman, Harold S. Bender, made the same claim: “There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion . . . ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice.”<sup>4</sup>

Muhammad Legenhausen, another of our dialogue partners, makes a similar historical connection: “Most liberals agree that liberalism is to be traced to the aftermath of the Reformation. Freedom of conscience in religious matters came first, and was then extended to other areas of opinion. So, tolerance of different opinions about religion lies at the very foundations of political liberalism, and religious pluralism may be viewed as a very late arrival which seeks to provide a theological basis for this tolerance.”<sup>5</sup> Social philosophers Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch made similar links between the Medieval and Reformation “sects” and the emergence of the modern world.

However, as I have argued elsewhere, “The more disillusioned one becomes with modernity . . . the more one is driven to re-examine critically this strange and alleged alliance between the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the modern world. Ironically, the very principles which pushed sixteenth-century Anabaptism to the periphery of late medieval heteronomous society today have become common stock and put us at the centre.” To what extent, then, should the Radical Reformation and the Free Church tradition be seen not as a fundamental critique of the Enlightenment but as both a product and an ally of the modern western spirit?<sup>6</sup>

My purpose here is to begin engaging Muslim friends in a critical dialogue about the role of reason, law, revelation, and the individual conscience. Despite the shortcomings of my communal past in this regard, some elements in the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage combine both the strengths and weaknesses of the so-called western “liberal” tradition.<sup>7</sup> My thesis is that conscience, when severed from a concept of law, becomes incomprehensible and not credible.

**An Islamic Perspective**

For both the Shi'ite Muslim and Mennonite Christian traditions, conscience, law, and revelation have an indispensable role in religious belief and action. There are some striking similarities but also differences. Muhammad Legenhausen, in his *Contemporary Topics of Islamic Thought*, has helpfully summarized the Islamic view of law and ethics.<sup>8</sup> With the emergence of modern Muslim nation states, he says, law (*shari'ah*) was increasingly restricted. Contemporary Muslims have reacted in several ways. Some argue for a revival of Muslim law, but reinterpreted to meet the challenges of modern life (modernists); others desire the application of traditional Islamic law to all aspects of the modern nation state (conservatives); and still others, opponents of the revival of Islamic law, believe “that beyond the realm of the rituals of worship, Islamic law is outmoded, an anachronism which has outlived its usefulness, an obstacle to ‘progress and development’” (Legenhausen, 106). Those in the latter group “emphasize the personal, inward dimensions of Islam, and hold that the only proper function of the *shari'ah* in modern society is the delineation of ritual law [not international law, commercial law, penal codes, or family law]” (106—107). The understanding of Islamic law and its role within the modern nation state (both the scope and content of *shari'ah*) is the most contested issue in today's Muslim societies, says the author:

Emerging from this controversy there is a new function being performed by the *shari'ah*, for perhaps more than ever before, one's concept of oneself as a Muslim and what one takes it to mean to be a Muslim are intertwined with one's understanding and attitude toward Islamic law. In Islam, the position of man and his responsibilities to God and other men are determined by the law rather than by theology per se. (107)

Legenhausen argues against both those advocating a Western style of political liberalism for Muslim societies and those wanting to restrict traditional practice to personal devotion, but argues in favor of a comprehensive system of law based on Islamic texts. However, conflicts and differences can neither be ignored nor resolved by coercion, but rather require research, analysis, and argumentation: “The law of God can no more be legislated than the laws of physics” (110). A salient feature of traditional Islamic interpretation of texts is the various levels of meaning ascribed to those texts.

What Legenhausen regards as absurd is a phenomenon that might be termed “Islamic Protestantism.” Christian Protestants of the sixteenth-century Reformation, he says, protested against a medieval Catholic sacramental system wherein priests had to administer the sacraments through which divine grace was acquired. Protestants like Luther emphasized that man was saved by faith alone and that grace was received directly from God through the Holy Spirit. In Islam, however, there are no priests; the authority of the ulama is derived from knowledge of the law, not from ordination to perform the sacraments. Grace is received by “submitting entirely to Allah in faith and works, which are repeatedly mentioned together in the Qur’an” (112). Thus, the grounds for the Protestant protest against the medieval church do not exist in Islam. “Islam has a nomic [law-based] rather than a sacramental orientation.”

In fact, Legenhausen contends, there is a direct link between Protestantism and the rise of modern secularism. Theoretically, the emphasis on faith as opposed to works (law), meant that religion became increasingly personal and private, leaving the public realm non-religious. Practically, the proliferation of Protestant sects, resulting in religious wars, led to a break-up of the unified power of religion, as represented by the traditional Church, and to a humanist, liberal, and secular reaction to such religiously-motivated warfare. Neither of these developments applies to Islam. In Islam faith does not contrast with works, but goes “beyond the requirements of the law with attendant supererogatory deeds, which are also defined by the law”; and wars among Muslims have been typically fought because of differences over who has responsibility for administering the law (113).

However, the differences between the Islamic and Protestant views of the relation of faith to works, grace to law, may have been over-estimated by Legenhausen. Radical Protestants like the Anabaptists and Mennonites wanted to hold faith and works together in a way Luther did not. Nevertheless, there is truth in what Legenhausen says, and it has to do with how grace (and freedom) function in relation to the law within Christianity, as we shall see below when considering Balthasar Hubmaier.

What is most relevant here is how Legenhausen sees the relation of reason, revelation, law, and conscience. In Islam “reason” does not stand in

tension with “revealed law.” The law as revealed through God’s prophets provides guidance to reason: “The acceptance and submission to divine guidance in the form of a sacred law in no way diminishes the need for the exercise of reason. Islam should not be seen as a simple solution to all life’s problems, but as an orientation toward those problems, an orientation which requires the attempt to live in accordance with the will of Allah, and which itself raises its own practical and intellectual problems” (115). How to understand and implement divine law still requires reason—not the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment “but a divinely enlightened faculty which by its very nature conforms to the commands of Allah” (116). Like reason, individual conscience and personal freedom have their legitimate place. However, “where the divine allows for freedom of thought and action, the freedom allowed is not the freedom of autonomy, an independence where the self dominates, but rather it is an oriented freedom, a freedom to find one’s own way toward the divine light. This freedom operates within the liberating constraints of the shari’ah” (116).

In Islamic thought a moral conscience is like an “inner prophet” that seems to be formally present in all human beings though it may be neglected or misinterpreted due to the influence of deviant social mores. Legenhausen claims that “we cannot find a single instance of a community throughout human history that did not distinguish in some way between what its members considered to be virtue and vice, good and bad, right and wrong” (125). These socially-determined morals and values that shape an individual’s conscience do not, however, necessarily coincide with the demands of revealed law. What ancient civilizations had going for them, in contrast to modern secular societies, was mainly the belief that “the right thing to do in a given set of circumstances was determined by the natural end of man and the law determined by reason” (126). This made them open to the absolute demands of religion and ideal ethics. What religion does is to take natural social mores (i.e., constituents of the natural moral conscience) and, through successive stages of moral instruction and enlightenment, confirm and reform them. On the surface at least, it appears that the Islamic view of reason, law, revelation, and conscience has a lot in common with Thomistic thought, to which we will now turn.

**Law as the Basis of Conscience**

In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) defines law (*lex*, derived from *ligare*, to bind) as “a rule and measure of acts, whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting” (Q. 90, A.1, 993).<sup>9</sup> The rule, measure, and first principle of all human action is reason. Speculative reason considers first principles in themselves, and practical reason directs them to action. The first principle and object of practical reason is happiness, the last end of human life; and happiness of the individual is possible only in relation to universal happiness or the common good (Q. 90, A.2, 994). The making of law, as ordered to the common good, “belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people” (Q. 90, A. 3, 995). Most important for our discussion is Aquinas’s exposition of the four different kinds of law, their sequence, and hierarchy of priority. Although Aquinas makes reason the rule and measure of law, it is not metaphysical reason in the modern Enlightenment sense but rationality grounded in the eternal *Logos*, namely divine intellect. Law (*lex*, or *nomos*) and *logos* are inextricably related.

*Eternal Law*

It is by divine reason that the whole universe is governed, and this government has the nature of law (Q. 91, A.1, 996). Unlike other forms of government that are directed toward some external end, “the end of the Divine government is God Himself, and His law is not distinct from Himself. Wherefore the eternal law is not ordained to another end”(Q. 91, A.1, 996). The eternal law is “nothing else than the type of Divine Wisdom, as directing all actions and movements”(Q. 93, A. 1, 1003). Each finite thing is directed toward a particular end according to an appropriate ideal type, thus reflecting plurality and distinction. But law directs things and acts to a common good, which ultimately is the eternal law of God. This eternal law is imprinted on us and can be known by us, not in its essence but in its effects: “Now all men know the truth to a certain extent, at least as to the common principles of the natural law; and as to the others, they partake of the knowledge of truth, some more, some less; and in this respect are more or less cognizant of the eternal law” (Q. 93, A.2, 1004).

However, just as no one can know the eternal law in its essence, so no one can know the “whole order of things.” Nothing in human affairs evades subjection to eternal law. Things are subject to it either through knowledge or

by an “inward motive principle.” All rational creatures have some knowledge of eternal law and have a natural inclination toward it, because “*we are naturally adapted to be the recipients of virtue*” (Q. 93, A. 6, 1007). There is no person in whom “the prudence of the flesh dominates so far as to destroy the whole good of his nature; and consequently there remains in man the inclination to act in accordance with the eternal law” (Q. 93, A. 6, 1007—08). This view is remarkably similar to that of Hubmaier, as we shall see. Eternal law, we might say, is grounded in the Being of God.

### *Natural Law*

Law exists as a rule and a measure in two ways: in the one who rules and measures, and in the one ruled and measured by participation. What does it mean to say the rational creature “participates” in eternal law? It is by virtue of the creature’s capacity for determining what is good and what is evil: “the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light. . . . [T]he natural law is nothing else than the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law” (Q. 92, A. 2, 997). Irrational creatures also partake in the eternal reason, not rationally but by way of natural appetite directed toward their particular end. Only in rational creatures is there an intellectual and rational participation in eternal reason as law. This imprint of eternal reason/law is understood as *synderesis* and conscience. Natural law is not a habit but consists of the principles upon which habit is based, or the principles that can be habitually possessed or appropriated (Q. 94, A.1, 1008).

The first principle of practical reason, within which the virtues and habits are located, is that “*good is that which all things seek after.*” Consequently, the first precept of law is that “*good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided*” (Q. 94, A.2, 1009). *Synderesis* and conscience cannot be understood apart from eternal law and divine law, and cannot be collapsed simply into the development of virtue as habit.

### *Human Law*

The strong chain of dependence between various levels of law becomes clearest in Aquinas’s discussion of human law and eternal law. As practical reason depends on speculative reason, so particular determinations of human

action depend on “general and indemonstrable principles.” These determinations constitute human law. The first principle of law in practical matters is the last end, happiness, and it is found only within the common good or the perfect community (universal happiness). Within the earthly sphere, this common good is identified with the state (Q. 90, A.3, 995). Human law, in order to have the force of law, needs not only to be promulgated but enforced, and this coercive enforcement can be exercised either by a whole people or by a viceregent of the people. Aquinas opts for the latter. Enforcement is incumbent upon the person who has care of the community. Anabaptists, we find, brought a good deal more critical scepticism to the realm of human law and its enforcement than did Aquinas. But even Aquinas allows for conscience-based civil disobedience.

Is human law binding on a person’s conscience? Although it might appear that it is not, because the conscience stands under a higher law and sometimes human laws contradict divine commandments, nevertheless, if properly understood, conscience is so bound (Q. 96, A. 4, 1019). Laws are just when ordered to the common good and lay burdens on subjects “according to an equality of proportion and with a view to the common good.” They are unjust when contrary to that end and when burdens are imposed unequally and disproportionately. Finally, laws that are unjust because they oppose Divine good (e.g., laws of tyrants) ought not to be observed, in accordance with Acts 5: 29: “*we ought to obey God rather than men*” (Q. 96, A. 4, 1020). Aquinas achieves a remarkable balance between (a) the subordination of the individual end to the common good, universal happiness within a perfect community, which temporally is identified with the state, and represented by a viceregent of the whole citizenry; and (b) the freedom and responsibility of the individual to follow his own conscience in determining when civil disobedience is called for due to unjust laws. Aquinas can do so because he sees human law subordinate to eternal law imprinted within the rational creature as an individual.

### *Divine Law*

The relation of divine law to eternal law is complex and difficult to comprehend fully. One way to view the difference is to distinguish them in terms of general revelation and special revelation. Traditionally, Christianity has divided

revelation into four types: *general revelation* (God's universal self-revelation in the natural order, most specifically in the individual conscience, accessible to all); *special revelation* (Divine self-revelation in the historical events of a specific peoples (the Hebrews) and definitively in Jesus the Christ, as recorded in the Old and New Testaments); *ongoing revelation* (God's continuing self-revelation in the history and tradition of the church, through the Holy Spirit (e.g., the ecumenical councils and development of dogma in the Roman Catholic Church)); *final revelation* (the completion of divine-self manifestation at the end of time and history, when God's truth will be fully disclosed; this relativizes all previous claims to knowledge of God and truth, to the extent that it is always imperfect).

Aquinas's view of natural law as based on eternal law falls into the category of general revelation, and divine law into special revelation. Divine law, we could say, is grounded in God's will, while eternal law is grounded in God's Being. Unlike Augustine and Luther, Aquinas thinks the rational principles of eternal and natural law are accessible to human reason by participation, even in humankind's postlapsarian state: "in no man does the prudence of the flesh dominate so far as to destroy the whole good of his nature; and consequently there remains in man the inclination to act in accordance with the eternal law" (Q. 93, A. 6, 1007). Despite this optimistic view of human nature, Aquinas recognizes the need for another type of law, divine law, which does not contradict eternal law but goes beyond it.

Why is divine law needed? First, human and natural law direct a human being on how he is to "perform his proper acts in view of his last end," an end "proportionate to his natural faculty [reason]." But since humans are directed to an ultimate, supernatural end, a law given by God more directly is required. Second, because of the "uncertainty of human judgment" in contingent matters, resulting in a diversity of judgments on human actions, an unerring divinely-given law that can be known with certainty is needed. Third, because human beings are competent to judge only on exterior actions, not interior movements, and because the "perfection of virtue" applies to both, a divine law is needed to direct interior acts. Finally, since human law is not comprehensive in its punishment of all evils (if it were, it would also punish good things and hinder the common good), a divine law is needed for the forbidding of all evils. Aquinas clearly does not de-link eternal law from divine law: "By the natural

law the eternal law is participated [in] proportionately to the capacity of human nature. But to his supernatural end man needs to be directed in a yet higher way. Hence the additional law given by God, whereby man shares more perfectly in the eternal law” (Q. 91, A.4, 998 — 99).

The certainty of the unerring divine law rests on its being given to us in the Old and New Testaments, which Aquinas equates respectively with the Old Law (the levitical priesthood) and the New Law (Christ’s priesthood). A supersessionist view of the relation of the NT to the OT is evident throughout his discussion. The two are related like boy to man, fear to love. The Old Law directs us to a sensible, earthly good (the earthly kingdom); the New Law to “an intelligible, heavenly good [the eternal Kingdom].” Further, the New Law directs internal human acts and controls the mind, while the Old Law restrains external actions only. The Old Law induces us to obey the commandments by fear of punishment, while the New Law does so “by love, which is poured into our hearts by the grace of Christ, bestowed in the New Law, but foreshadowed in the Old” (Q. 91, A.5, 999). Ultimately, it is in Christ that the divine law receives its clearest expression, for salvation could only be achieved by way of Christ.

The Holy Spirit also plays a role but not a pivotal one for Aquinas in the context of his exposition of law. There is sense in which the spiritual person is not under the law, because he obeys it willingly through love in his heart given by the Holy Spirit. Such a person’s works could be considered not his own but those of the Holy Spirit, and “since the Holy Ghost is not under the law, as neither is the Son, . . . it follows that such works, in so far as they are of the Holy Ghost, are not under the law” (Q. 93, A. 6, 1007).

Aquinas’s brilliant linking of the four levels may give too much priority to the intellectual over the affective, and to the universal over the particular and experiential. His synthesis may also not do justice to the dynamic personal “Word of God” that encounters us as grace and demand (or command). Nevertheless, we would do well to reconsider seriously what his view of law has to offer an age that has strong antinomian tendencies. Another perspective useful for our present purpose is offered by two twentieth-century Protestant thinkers, to whose work we shall now briefly turn.

**Protestant Command Ethics and the Freedom of Conscience**

*Karl Barth* (1886-1968)

Twentieth-century Protestantism mounted a robust challenge both to the classical and Thomistic natural law tradition, and to the liberal pluralism and relativism that avoids about universal truth altogether. This anti-natural law and anti-liberal challenge thinking finds its most persuasive articulation in the theology of Karl Barth. His approach can be described as “Word of God” theology and “divine command” ethics.

For Barth, Divine self-revelation as Word of God occurs most definitively in the event of Christ and secondarily in the Scripture and proclamation as witness to that event. This self-revelation is rooted in the trinity of God: God the Father as the “Revealer,” God the Son as the “Revealed,” and God the Spirit as the “Revealedness” (or “Revealing”).<sup>10</sup> There are no general laws and no system of rules by which divine will can be casuistically known and followed. Obedience to God’s will is obedience to a specific concrete command of God in every moment (hence, “act” or “command” ethics), and conscience can only be viewed in this concrete sense:

[God’s command] is as such both the most general law and also a most specific law in its application to [the human being] here and now. And it is true that in this most concrete encounter judgment is given whether his conduct is good or evil. If it is meaningful to understand by ‘conscience’ this encounter of God’s command and human action, then it is true that in each moment and act of his conduct every man finds himself in a *casus conscientiae*. And the decision in each of these ‘cases of conscience’ is taken in such a way that God’s general command for all men in every situation is as such also the highly particular, concrete, and special command for this or that man in the ‘case of conscience’ of his particular situation, and therefore the measure by which the goodness or evil of his action is to be assessed. (*Church Dogmatics III/1*, 9)

The only way we can understand Barth’s view of “divine command” ethics and conscience as a response of obedience or disobedience to a particular command in a particular circumstance is to take Barth’s view of revelation not as a revelation of a set of propositional truths or laws given in

a text, but as a personal divine—human encounter. Even though Barth espouses a critical realism of sorts (the objective nature of God, Christ, and Spirit), he nevertheless follows in the nominalistic/voluntaristic tradition of the late medieval period—Duns Scotus, for example—in separating the being of God from the will of God, and emphasizing the primacy of personal Divine agency and willing. In so doing, I believe any consistent ethic that can be sustained over time is seriously weakened.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized this weakness in Barth's theological ethics. In his 1927 doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*, and his post-doctoral thesis, *Act and Being*,<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer suggests that it is within the Christian community (the Church) that the being of God and the historical continuity of divine command finds expression. Though their views differ significantly, both Barth and Bonhoeffer have a deep suspicion of an autonomously formed conscience, and make the individual conscience, when expressing the inner voice of God's command (Barth), and when formed according to Christ (Bonhoeffer), the highest court of appeal in the earthly sphere. For Barth, conscience as the "inner voice of God" is not a divine imprint on our nature, as it is in Aquinas and possibly Hubmaier, but an alien voice speaking to us from the outside: "To have a conscience is no more and no less than to have the Holy Spirit. For 'no one knows what is in God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:11)."<sup>12</sup> Conscience is God speaking to us through ourselves . . . in the voice of conscience we can receive the truth about ourselves (if only we can *hear*) and that we *have to* obey it. If we obey conscience we grant to it *authority* over us, a *last* and decisive authority (Barth, *Ethics*, 481).

Precisely because conscience is a direct, personal response to the personal command of God in a given situation,

conscience is in fact the final court and ultimate criterion in the question of obedience . . . there can be no command of God which is not also our own command, no authority which we do not exercise over ourselves. . . . Over against all the authority of church and state . . . the question and criterion is freedom of conscience, i.e., the authority of God from which that relative authority has its commission. . . . This is why there can be no

compulsion by conscience. . . . because it would eliminate the last and decisive court in the question of obedience. . . . [C]onscience will not let itself be coerced, because by nature it is one's own. To talk of appealing to someone's conscience or laying a matter on one's conscience for someone else is to use totally impossible expressions. Nor can one seriously speak about educating the conscience or about a public conscience, for where, then, is the unconditionality of its judgement that depends on our being the children of God, a being into which we cannot be educated but which we must have directly from God, and which we can have, not in relation to other people, but truly only in our own relation to God? (Barth, *Ethics*, 483—85).

Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis for his role in an unsuccessful conspiracy against Hitler, modified Barth's "command ethics" by combining it with an ontology of the Church as the presence of Christ in history. In his *Ethics*, published posthumously, he discusses conscience in the context of what it means to take on the guilt that comes whenever one acts responsibly in a sinful situation: "real innocence shows itself precisely in a man's entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men. Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt [i.e., the guilt of others]."<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer considers conscience in two ways. First, there is the *natural conscience* that refuses to take on guilt for another in order to remain true to the inviolability of conscience. Obedience to one's own conscience takes precedence over responsible action and its accompanying incurring of the guilt of and for another. Ideally one should never act against one's conscience, which "comes from a depth which lies beyond a man's own will and his own reason and it makes itself heard as the call of human existence to unity with itself" (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 211). To act against the authority of one's own conscience leads to the destruction and disintegration of the self and is parallel to suicide. In fact, the two often go together. The call of conscience arises when the unity of human existence is threatened. In its natural capacity, the conscience represents the ego's attempt to justify itself by conforming to a universal law of good; the natural conscience "has its origin and goal in the autonomy of man's own ego" (*Ethics*, 212).

Second, the conscience can be viewed as a *transformed* conscience, when the existence and the unity of the human self no longer rests with the ego and its inner law, but “through the miracle of faith, beyond the man’s own ego and its law, in Jesus Christ” (*Ethics*, 212). The Christian surrenders his ego’s autonomy “for the sake of an unconditional heteronomy.” “Natural conscience . . . is now seen to be the most ungodly self-justification, and it is overcome by the conscience which is set free in Jesus Christ and which summons me to unity with myself in Jesus Christ [who] has become my conscience. This means that I can now find unity with myself only in the surrender of my ego to God and to men. The origin and the goal of my conscience is not a law but it is the living God and the living man as he confronts me in Jesus Christ” (*Ethics*, 212—13). Christ now sets us free from the law to serve God and the neighbor even to the point of entering “into the guilt of another man for the other man’s sake.” The conscience that has been set free “is not timid like the conscience which is bound by the law, but it stands wide open for our neighbour and for his concrete distress” (*Ethics*, 213).

A surrendered ego does not disregard the unity of the self but it finds it elsewhere (in Christ). The surrender of the ego should never be confused with its annihilation: “The extent of the guilt which may be accepted in the pursuit of responsible action is on each occasion concretely limited by the requirement of the man’s unity with himself. . . .” (*Ethics*, 215). Such a surrendered ego also does not deny the law: “This is the law for God and for our neighbour as it is explained in the decalogue, in the sermon on the mount and in the apostolic parables. . . . [I]n the contents of its law natural conscience is in strikingly close agreement with that of the conscience which has been set free in Christ” (*Ethics*, 216). Conscience, both natural and freed, “contains fundamental features of the law of life, even though these features may be distorted in detail and perverted in principle,” and guards against the violation of the law of life. However, conscience no longer has the last word. It is Christ who has the last word, as the “Lord of conscience” (*Ethics*, 216).

Barth and Bonhoeffer make a Protestant distinction between *natural conscience*, based on law and playing largely a negative, judgmental role, and the *transformed conscience*, freed in Christ. Divine will revealed as Word through a personal encounter with God through the Holy Spirit takes precedence over human, natural, and eternal law. Grace supersedes nature and law.

Protestant views of conscience as rooted in a “voluntaristic” divine-human encounter, represented here by both Barth and Bonhoeffer, are fundamentally suspicious of a Thomistic “realistic” understanding of conscience as human participation in eternal law. As we shall see below, Hubmaier in his identification of conscience with the human soul, and the human spirit as the image of God in us, is closer to Aquinas than Barth. One might also add that the Muslim view is has strong affinities with the Thomistic view of revelation, law, and reason.

### **An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective**

Anabaptism has been characterized as neither Catholic nor Protestant but as a third way of understanding the Christian gospel.<sup>14</sup> An ongoing debate among Anabaptist scholars concerns whether sixteenth-century Anabaptism is to be seen as radical Protestantism, a modern form of medieval Catholic spirituality, or an altogether distinct species of Christianity. One issue is how Anabaptists, and their descendants the Mennonites, see the relation of faith to works, and of grace to nature. It is generally accepted that although the Anabaptists were Protestant in espousing that one can not earn one’s own salvation through works, nevertheless a transformed, “regenerated” life manifested in good works and made possible by divine grace through the power of Holy Spirit was intrinsic to salvation. This also entailed a transformation of conscience and the role of law.

Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528) was the most systematically trained Anabaptist theologian, a student of the great Catholic Nominalist theologian John Eck at the University of Ingolstadt, where he also briefly was a professor of theology prior to his conversion to Anabaptism. Hubmaier’s anthropology, including his view of conscience, illustrates how Anabaptism was both (rather than neither) Catholic and Protestant in its theology and ethics. Drawing on medieval sources, Hubmaier develops a tripartite anthropology in which body, soul, and spirit are dynamically related. The flesh is the material, physical body that derives from the earth and that we have in common with the rest of creation. The soul is the life principle within us, that which made the dust of the ground alive when God breathed into it. The spirit is the image of God in us. Hubmaier distinguishes between the divine Spirit and the spirit as a component of the human being. This spirit is the “part” of human nature that

is the point of contact for the divine Spirit. The soul finds itself hovering, as it were, between flesh and spirit. These three elements or “essences” are found in every human being and reflect the Holy Trinity.<sup>15</sup>

Originally, human beings were created free in body, soul, and spirit, but then lost their freedom in sinning (the Fall). They regained their freedom, at least partially, with the death and resurrection of Christ. However, each element in the make-up of human nature was affected differently by sin. In the prelapsarian state all three were good, and wholly free in the recognition, capability, and performance of good or evil, a power derived from God. After the Fall, the flesh has been completely ruined and the soul has been seriously wounded, not even knowing good or evil. Only the spirit retains its original righteousness, but it is imprisoned within the fallen human being and can only “bear internal witness to righteousness against evil” (Hubmaier, 438). With the restoration brought about by Christ, the soul regains both the capacity to know good and evil and the freedom to choose. The flesh remains ruined until the resurrection of the body. The soul remains between ruined flesh and spirit, and can choose to follow either. If it chooses the way of the flesh, it sins willingly and is held accountable. So human destiny now lies with human choice: “If I now will, then I will be saved by the grace of God; if I do not will, then I will be damned, and that on the basis of my own obstinacy and willfulness” (442).

Like Menno Simons and other Anabaptists, Hubmaier distinguished between a “bad” conscience and a “good” conscience. A bad conscience or accusing conscience is like a “gnawing worm” that “gnaws at a man constantly and allows him no rest,” or like the rooster that reminded Peter of his sin. When this rooster crows in us and “scratches in our conscience, we can be sure that we have overstepped the plumb line of the divine Word and have sinned.” Then we must weep bitterly like Peter did, show remorse for our sin, repent, and thereby be reconciled to God and achieve a good conscience (531—32). Hubmaier’s view of the role of natural law is similar to Luther’s. Law creates an awareness in our conscience of our sin that leads to despair. It convinces us that we would be eternally damned were it not for an alien righteousness that comes to our aid. The law points us to Christ, who frees us from our sin. Where Hubmaier and other Anabaptists differed from Luther was in their view of how the conscience was transformed after being freed

by Christ, and in their notion of the role of law in the new, freed state. As the freedom of the soul has been restored with the death and resurrection of Christ so that it can choose to obey the law of Christ, so now the conscience has been freed to guide obedience to that new law. For Luther, the nature of the human being remained unchanged—as both sinner and saint—even after justification by Christ through faith. For the Anabaptists, however, the “image of God” in human beings was never as radically distorted as it is for Luther, Calvin, Barth, and Bonhoeffer either before or after Christ, and was viewed more along the lines of Aquinas.

Here [Romans 8:13] you see clearly that the image or inbreathing of God is still in us all, although captive and as a live spark covered with cold ashes is still alive and will steam if heavenly water is poured on it. It also lights up and burns if one blows on it. . . . If one says there is nothing good in man, that is saying too much . . . for God’s image has never yet been completely obliterated in us. How can it be evil, for (like the law) it shows and teaches us the good? Far be it from us then to call it evil. For we know that it is holy, makes us righteous and is wholly good. . . . Yes, to the present day through the Word God sent, our souls are just as free in themselves to will good and evil as was Adam’s soul in Paradise. (Hubmaier, 360—61)

### **Conclusion**

For our dialogue, it is important to identify important commonalities but also differences between our two traditions. Within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition there is a much greater appreciation for human freedom and responsibility to choose good over evil than within some forms of mainline Protestantism. If the image of God in human beings was never totally eradicated by sin, this notion links us to some aspects of the Catholic, Thomistic natural law tradition—and perhaps also to Islam. What distinguishes us from traditional Catholicism, however, is our tenacious belief in personal decision-making as the basis for joining the believing community (reflected in adult baptism as a core belief). This focus on personal freedom, personal decision, a free and uncoerced conscience, has consequences not only for religious life but also for social life within community. It led our Anabaptist ancestors to

call for civil freedom to follow one's conscience, and for toleration from magistrates in the area of religion.

At the same time we must not confuse this Anabaptist-Mennonite view with the autonomous, post-Enlightenment rationality and freedom that underlies modern democratic liberal and pluralistic societies. It is rather a freedom and moral accountability before God as revealed in Christ. It is a freedom that binds one even more radically to the law as revealed by Christ, and historically it has frequently led to unfortunate forms of legalism. This new law in Christ is perhaps no more clearly stated than in the Sermon on the Mount, which is interpreted quite literally by Mennonites to mean a call to peace-making and nonviolence within the political sphere. The challenge for the Mennonite tradition is to explore more carefully how this "new law" of Christ is related to divine, eternal, natural, and human law, especially if we take seriously Jesus' prolegomena to that Sermon: "I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it" (Matt. 5: 17).<sup>16</sup>

Like the Shi'ite Muslims, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has a high view of human nature, reason and law—human nature is not perceived as totally depraved, as in some forms of Protestantism, but partially retains the image of God in soul and spirit. This similarity between our religious traditions can serve as a fruitful opportunity for future Shi'ite Muslim and Mennonite Christian dialogue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The essay printed here is a much condensed version of the original paper presented at the conference. That paper included a detailed critical review of Douglas Langston's *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). This review will be the subject of a future article in CGR.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of recent interpretations of the variety of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, see my "From Denominational Apologetics to Social History and Systematic Theology: Recent Developments in Early Anabaptist Studies," in *Religious Studies Review* 29.3 (July 2003): 235-40.

<sup>3</sup> See David W. Shenk, "Pluralist Culture and Truth," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21.3 (Fall 2003): 75.

<sup>4</sup> Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1944), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: Al-Hoda, 1999), 7.

<sup>6</sup>A. James Reimer, “The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 164.

<sup>7</sup> In his survey of conscience and the virtues in the western tradition, Douglas C. Langston totally side-steps any reference to God, let alone divine and eternal law. In fact he gives no consideration to law at all. “The morally good agent,” he says, “is a criterion for moral action not because of some mysterious infallible moral power, but because this agent has cultivated the virtues and the mature conscience essential to their possession. Conscience provides the checks on morally good agents so that their behavior is not at odds with the demands of their societies and prevents the morally good agent from slipping into moral self-delusion.” Douglas C. Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Legenhausen, *Contemporary Topics of Islamic Thought* (Tehran: Alhoda Publishers, 2000), 105—45.

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*. Complete American edition in two vols. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, [1948]).

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God and III/4: The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). First published in 1931 as *Akt und Sein*.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 476.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1955, 1960), 210.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. 3rd ed. (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, “Freedom of the Will,” in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, tr. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1989), 426-48, 429. See also my discussion of Hubmaier’s anthropology, “Christian Anthropology: The Perils of the Believers Church View of the *Humanum*,” in my *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 524-36.

<sup>16</sup> In “I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it’: A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions,” I explore how this statement might be taken in a way that takes civil law more seriously than Mennonites have frequently done. See *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascade Publishing House, 2003), 245-73.

# Reflections on Revelation and Authority Among Shi'ites and Mennonites

*Muhammad Legenhausen*

Say, 'We have faith in Allah, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.' (Qur'an 3:84)

## **Introduction**

At first glance, our task seems rather outlandish: Mennonites and Shi'ites do not share a common history, and until very recently do not seem to have been aware of one another's existence. So, what could be the point of discussing theological topics like *revelation* and *authority* that are so peculiar to each tradition? One purpose is to help us to get acquainted. Since revelation and authority are such important topics to both groups, if we are to understand one another we had better try to get a picture of how they are viewed by both. If our first purpose is to discuss these topics in order to learn *about* one another, a second purpose might be to learn *from* one another.

Despite growing up in different neighborhoods, important common features are found in the stances Mennonites and Shi'ites have taken on both issues. The different directions that have been explored may enhance our own thinking. Finally, this exercise might even help to provide some theoretical support for our continuing cooperation and friendship.

With these aims in mind, I propose to examine first revelation, as understood by Shi'ites, and then to point out similarities and differences with the Mennonite view. Next I'll try the same with authority, and its relation to revelation. At the end of each part I'll offer some suggestions, and ultimately I'll attempt to tie some of these strands of thought together.

## **Revelation**

In order to understand how divine revelation is related to authority from the perspective of Shi'ite Islam, we could start with questions about how the

Qur'ân and *hadîth* are interpreted, what interpretations are considered authoritative, and what sorts of arguments are used to invalidate unacceptable interpretations. From there, we could move on to issues pertaining to Islamic jurisprudence, and how rulings given by experts come to be seen as authoritative. Finally, we could review Shi'ite political theory, particularly claims that political authority must be grounded in revelation, and how this has led the Shi'ah to challenge competing claims to political authority. In what follows I'd like to touch on all these issues at least briefly, but it would be better to begin with a discussion of Shi'ite views of revelation and the claim to obedience that revelation makes. Naturally, there are differences between Christian and Muslim ideas about revelation, and these should be made clear.

The issues become more complex when we consider the notion of authority. Even though there are important differences between the concept of *revelation* in Christianity and *wahy* in Islam, the two are pretty straightforwardly comparable. But when it comes to the notion of *authority*, we find that the English word *authority* is itself discussed in several senses in relation to revelation; so it will be helpful to distinguish these and look for relevant discussions in Islamic theology of each of them.

Our faiths are grounded firmly in scriptural revelation. To begin to grasp the concept of revelation in Islam, we should start with the Qur'ân. The Arabic word translated as *revelation* is *wahy*. On the basis of pre-Islamic poetry, it is said to have the literal meaning of giving a message quickly and hiddenly, whether by gesture, in written form, or by inspiration. This term or one of its cognate forms occurs in the Qur'ân 78 times. In nearly every case it is God who does the revealing, but five exceptions help us grasp the concept. In one case, the meaning is to indicate or give a signal without words: when Zachariah asked God for a sign, which was that he would not speak to the people for three nights, he emerged from the temple and *signaled* or *revealed* to the people that they should glorify God morning and evening.

Notice the link here with authority, for what is signaled is a command, the order to glorify God. Devils also reveal deceptively to one another and to men, inspiring evil works; and liars make false claims to revelation or claim that they can reveal as only God can reveal. So, the first thing we learn from the Qur'ân about revelation is that the concept is used primarily for divine revelation, although there is also a more general sense of conveying a message.

Who are the recipients of divine revelation? The paradigmatic recipient as mentioned in the Qur'ân is the Prophet Muhammad, and roughly half the occurrences of *wahy* and its derivatives indicate him as such. Other recipients are the Jewish prophets, of whom Moses is the most frequently mentioned, the mother of Moses, the disciples of Jesus, angels, and even the bee. The earth and the heavens are also mentioned as recipients. People in general may be said to be indirect recipients, in that the message revealed to the prophets is to be delivered to them. Revelation is not an exclusive feature of prophecy. God reveals Himself to creatures that are not prophets, like the bee, angels, the mother of Moses, the disciples of Jesus, and the seven heavens. What distinguishes the revelations given to the prophets, peace be with them, from those given to others is the content of what is revealed, not the mere fact of revelation.

Nevertheless, Muslim theologians have sometimes given *wahy* a technical sense for the sort of revelation given exclusively to the prophets, to which we may refer as *prophetic revelation*. Prophetic revelation is not limited to the revelations given to Muhammad but includes those given by God to all the prophets who preceded him as well.

Often the Qur'ân, instead of using *wahy* to refer to revelation, makes mention of what has been “sent down,” using cognates with the root *nzl*. These cognates occur with the sense of revelation in more than 200 instances.

The prophets are given a divine commission through revelation, according to which they are to convey divine guidance to others. One cannot be a prophet without having been given revelation from God, as He addresses Muhammad in the Qur'ân: *We did not send any before you except as men to whom We revealed . . .* (Q 12:109). But the idea that revelation contains divine guidance in the form of directives is not limited to prophetic revelation. The revelation to the bee contains divine instructions about where to live, what to eat, and what sort of behavior to have (Q 16:68). This revelation is authoritative because it contains divine commands about how to live. Likewise, commentators say the revelation given to the seven heavens is the order given by God for the activities pertaining to them. God also granted revelation to the disciples of Jesus in which they are told to believe in Him and in His Apostle, Jesus; and the disciples respond with submission.

The content of the revelation to which derivatives of *wahy* refer may be divided into descriptive and prescriptive forms, although the border between them is often blurred, as when it is reported that one will surely be lost if one worships others besides God. The form of the revelation is descriptive—it just says what will happen to idolaters—but the prescriptive illocutionary force of the message is just as clear as it would be in a “Thou shalt not” form. If we count all such warnings as prescriptive, then in more than half the cases where derivatives of *wahy* are used, the associated revelation is prescriptive. Indeed, the most typical of all prophetic revelations is warning.

Warning in Arabic is derived from the root *ndhr*; from it come *nadhr*, vow, and *nudhr*, warning. The Prophet Muhammad is commanded by Allah to warn, and he is repeatedly referred to in the Qur’àn as a warner, *nadhîr*. Cognates of *nudhr* occur about 120 times. Warnings typically have both a descriptive and prescriptive element, although the latter is often implicit, as in a sign saying Wet Paint! The typical form of prophetic warning is given in this verse: *Certainly it has been revealed to you and to those before you: ‘If you ascribe a partner to Allah your works shall fail and you shall surely be among the losers’* (Q 39:65).

In addition to warnings, the content of revelation is often specific prescriptions, such as dietary laws or divine instructions given to Noah to build his ark. Sometimes what is revealed are tidings of the unseen, information about what has happened with regard to Mary the mother of Jesus, and the prophets Joseph and Noah. These sorts of revelation function as supports of prophetic authority because the information revealed could come only from God.

Sometimes what is revealed is a series of commands, to worship only Allah, to be kind to parents, to be charitable, not to kill or fornicate or usurp the property of orphans, to be fair and to shun pride, after which it is stated: *These are among what your Lord has revealed to you of wisdom* (Q 12:39). Here the content of the revelation is wisdom that consists of guidance in the form of rules of conduct.

As with explicit warnings, other instances of revelation often have the form of a combined descriptive and prescriptive element: *We did not send any apostle before you, but We revealed to him that ‘There is no god except Me; so worship Me’* (Q 21:25). This is an important verse because it states a common content to all prophetic revelation. All prophetic revelation

combines the descriptive and prescriptive. The descriptive part is ontological: only one existent has the status of divinity. The prescriptive part establishes religious practice.

Revelation can also be an assurance. When the faithless threatened the prophets, *Then their Lord revealed to them: 'We will surely destroy the unjust, and surely We will settle you in the land after them'* (Q 14:13-14). The assurances revealed for those who believe are referred to as “good news” (*bushrà*), and the Prophet is referred to as a warner (*nadhîr*) and a bringer of good news (*bashîr*): *Does it seem odd to these people that We have revealed to a man from among themselves: "Warn mankind, and give good news to the faithful that they are in good stead with their Lord"?* (10:2). Like warnings, good news contains both a descriptive and an explicit or implicit prescriptive element. For example, *Indeed this Qur'ân guides to what is most upright, and gives good news to the faithful who do righteous deeds that there is a reward for them* (Q 17:9).

There is no particular disagreement among Muslims about the meaning of revelation or *wahy* as described here. The main distinction to be found in Shi'ite writings on revelation is epistemological. According to some sources, the Prophet was doubtful about the revelations he had begun to receive, and was reassured by a Christian monk that he had all the signs of being a true prophet. The Shi'ah reject such stories as inconsistent with the doctrine of prophetic infallibility. According to them, the revelatory experience was such as to leave no room for doubt as to its authenticity.<sup>1</sup>

The Mennonite concept of revelation, as with other Christian denominations, is broader than the Muslim concept of *wahy*. The primary revelation for Christians is Jesus Christ himself, but it is held that the disciples of Jesus plus Paul were recipients of divine revelation. Scripture is called the word of God by Christians, not because it was sent down as a “book” to Jesus but because those who wrote and compiled it are believed to have been *inspired* by the Holy Spirit to do so correctly. If Christian and Muslim scriptures are both considered revealed, the sense of revelation is certainly different.

### **Inspiration**

Both Christians and Muslims distinguish revelation from inspiration. Christians sometimes distinguish *general* from *special* revelation, where *general*

*revelation* means whatever can be known about God through reason. Our concern here is with *special revelation*, by which is meant the extraordinary communication of a divine message to human beings. For Christians, special revelation culminates in the person of Jesus. The recording of scripture, through which the content of special revelation is conveyed, is considered reliable enough to be called the word of God because of the divine inspiration given to those who recorded, collected, and selected the canon.

The specific function of inspiration is to preserve revelation in a trustworthy and sufficient form to serve its divine purpose. Inspiration is the activity of the Holy Spirit in securing for the church the Scriptures in such a form that the church may trust its verbal form as an adequate, authentic, and sufficient vehicle of special revelation.<sup>2</sup>

While Muslims also distinguish between revelation and inspiration, there is nothing corresponding to the Christian notion of inspiration as divine protection of the canon, not because there is no belief in a supernatural protection of the text but because appeal to such protection is made without recourse to any sort of inspiration. The canonicity of the Qur'ân is usually defended on historical grounds and on the basis of its being subject to divine protection.<sup>3</sup> When Muslims distinguish *wahy* from inspiration (*ilhâm*), it is usually on the basis of: (a) the recipient, restricting *wahy* in its technical sense of prophetic revelation to the prophets, while visions and orations given to the Imams or other saints are called *inspiration*; (b) the passivity of the recipient as adding nothing of his own personality in the process but serving purely as a clear channel; (c) the claim that accompanies the revelation, as providing public guidance; or (d) the unquestionable certainty that accompanies the revelation.

Muslims often distinguish among prophets those commissioned by God for guidance of the public through divine law. A prophet is a *nabî*, and one commissioned with a public message is an apostle or messenger, *rasêl*. Those who receive divine inspirations at a rank below the prophets are called *awliyâ*, usually translated as *saints*.

In short, the concept of *inspiration* among Muslims is similar to what some Christians would call *private revelation*. Although Muslims hold that Jesus' disciples may have been inspired, they did not receive prophetic revelations. Among the Shi'ah, Peter is especially honored as the trustee of Jesus, holding a position analogous to that of Imam 'Alî with respect to

Muhammad. Paul is not generally seen in a very favorable light and is often held responsible for what are considered excesses in Christian doctrine.

### **Inlibration and Incarnation**

Harry Wolfson coined the term *inlibration*, as a parallel to *incarnation*, for the Muslim idea of how divinity is present in the text of the Qur'ân. Wolfson used the term in an attempt to respond to Muslim polemics against incarnation. The main logical difficulties in the doctrine of the incarnation, he argued, have counterparts in Muslim ideas about how the divine message takes on linguistic form.<sup>4</sup> There are obvious limitations to the analogy, but it may still help us to sort out an old problem about the Muslim understanding of the Gospel (*injil*). In the Qur'ân, *injil* is used for the “book” revealed to Jesus. According to narrations from the Prophet and the Imams, it is used for the scripture possessed by Christians. The problem is that the gospels considered scripture by Christians are not a book revealed to Jesus. Some Muslim writers have sought to resolve this inconsistency by holding that the gospels in the Bible are a corruption of the book revealed to Jesus, but this is implausible because the gospels are not the sort of book that, by means of additions and omissions, could have evolved from a book given to Jesus.

Perhaps this puzzle can be solved by reversing the direction of Wolfson's explanation of *inlibration*. Instead of using this idea to find something analogous to the incarnation in Islam, we can use it to find something analogous to *wahy* in Christianity. Recall that the main form of the content of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad is warning and good news: *Indeed We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good news and as a warner; and you will not be questioned concerning the inmates of hell* (Q 2:119).<sup>5</sup> Given that the Arabic *injil* is derived from the Greek *euangélion* (good news), we could take the “book” given to Jesus to be the good news revealed to him. What is essential for consistency with the Qur'ân is that the revelation given to Jesus should be one that brings with it the announcement of divine law for his age, a new covenant.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not the divine message given to Jesus came in a verbal form, it became articulated in his life and teachings. If the presence of the divine message in the Qur'ân may be called *inlibration*, Muslims could allow that the presence of the divine message or *logos* in Christ may be called *incarnation*, not in the traditional Christian sense of God becoming a man

but in the sense that His Word is revealed in the life of a man in such a way that Jesus is himself called the Word of God in the Qur'ân: *When the angels said, 'O Mary! Allah gives you the good news of a Word from Him whose name is Christ Jesus son of Mary (3:45); That is Jesus, son of Mary, a Word of the Real (19:34);* And since his life and teachings expressing the good news revealed to him have been recorded in the four gospels, they too, by extension, may be called *injl*. On this reading, what becomes incarnate in Christ is not God, but His revelation, the good news.

This sort of solution has not been explicitly discussed by Shi'ite theologians as far as I am aware, although the Christology implied is recognizably Islamic. Issues pertaining to the doctrine of incarnation have been particularly divisive between Muslims and Christians and the cause of much sectarian dispute among Christians themselves, so I don't want to pursue this too much further—except to recall that the suggestion seeks not so much to solve a puzzle in Islamic theology as to illustrate how the concept of revelation differs between Muslims and Christians, although perhaps not irreconcilably so.

Both Christians and Muslims agree that revelation is a special communication from God to selected individuals through whom He provides guidance for the people. Scripture is considered by both groups to be the authentic record of the revealed word of God. Both consider revelation as recorded in scripture to be authoritative. Both Mennonites and Shi'ites hold that the correct interpretation of revelation is to be found, of course, within their own traditions.

### **Authority**

A large number of issues are connected with authority in relation to divine revelation. First, different senses of authority need to be distinguished. For convenience, we may distinguish doctrinal authority from prescriptive authority, although the lines between them are often blurred. By doctrinal authority I mean the authority given texts, institutions, or individuals as sources of religious doctrine. Prescriptive authority is the authority given texts, institutions, or persons to command obedience. With regard to each, we can ask about the authority of revelation, and about how and to what extent others may derive their authority from revelation. There is also the question of whether revelation is the sole authority in any of these areas.

In order to understand the concepts related to authority in the Qur'ân, we need to examine a number of terms. One of the most crucial for the connection to revelation is the word used for "following," cognates with the root *tb'*. The idea of following is important because the one who follows accepts the leadership or authority of what is followed. The idea of following what is received through revelation is a recurrent theme. The Prophet follows what is revealed to him: *Say, 'I am not a novelty among the apostles, nor do I know what will be done with me, or with you, I just follow whatever is revealed to me, and I am just a manifest warner'* (Q 46:9), and he is commanded to invite the people to follow him for the love of God: *Say, 'If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins'* (Q 3:31).

The idea of following is closely related to that of submission, *islâm*. It is not simply a matter of doing the right thing but involves accepting divine guidance as well. Following thus involves both belief and works, and here is a parallel to what Christians call justification. Justification is not by mere works, but neither is it "by faith alone." At the same time that Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise and exiled to earth, God turns to them clemently and says: *Should any guidance come to you from Me, those who follow My guidance shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve* (Q 2:38).

Revelation is authoritative, both doctrinally and morally, for both Mennonites and Shi'ites. Both agree that the authority brought by revelation gives authority to specified individuals, and that religious authority may be delegated in some way. Both traditions have questioned claimants to this authority. The Anabaptists rejected popes and the Shi'ah rejected caliphs. How could they do this if the proper understanding of revelation is confined to the authorities? Criticism of authority is only possible if a standpoint can be taken that is itself not dependent on that authority and has the authority to pass judgment on it.

For Anabaptists and Protestants, the teachings of Scripture were so plainly in conflict with the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church that a direct appeal was made to Bible texts to refute claims to authority made by the Church. For the Shi'ah, the situation was a bit more complicated. Appealing to explicit teachings of the Qur'ân to refute the caliphs and their supporters

was only part of the strategy. They also claimed to find an authenticity, based on the explicit designation of their Imams in succession from the Prophet, that was lacking in other claimants to religious authority. Detractors have claimed that Shi'ites believe in inherited religious authority, but the principle is one of designation or appointment rather than mere genealogy. Because of this designation, although the cycle of prophetic authority reaches completion with Muhammad, the cycle of the authority of the Imams continues.

Although the Shi'ah normally appeal to reason in order to support claims about the authority of the Imams, there are distinct parallels here with Mennonite ideas about the believers' church and the appeal to conscience. We recently celebrated the holiday of Eid al-Ghadir, which commemorates the designation of 'Alí by the Prophet near the pont of Ghadir Khumm with the words, "For whomever I am the *mawlà* (authority), this man 'Alí is his *mawlà*." The term *mawlà* is cognate with *wilayat*. He then invited the Muslims to acknowledge the status of 'Alí by congratulating him. Acknowledgement of authority was usually made in Arab society through a handshake in a ceremony called *bay'at* (literally, making a sale, but usually—somewhat misleadingly—translated as a pledge of allegiance). In making *bay'at*, one acknowledges the Imam's leadership and accepts his authority. One condition for a valid *bay'at* is that those entering into it must be sane adults. During the days of the Shi'ite Imams, one became a Shi'ite, literally a partisan of the Imam, through *bay'at*. There are obvious parallels with the Anabaptist notion of accepting the authority of the Church through adult baptism. Of course, there are significant differences as well; for example, the Christian concept of Church is not found in Islam. Nevertheless, common themes find different forms of expression in Mennonite and Shi'ite traditions.

The appeal to reason is itself a kind of appeal to conscience. Anabaptists generally took a dim view of the idea that reason has any special religious authority, because so much had been justified in Catholic tradition in the name of reason that seemed to the Anabaptists to fly in the face of the obvious testimony of scripture. While we do not find the same sort of scorn for "the learned" in the Shi'ite tradition as is common in early Anabaptist writings, numerous narrations attributed to the Imams castigate hypocritical scholars.

## **Doctrinal Authority and Revelation**

### *Epistemological Issues*

How does a prophet know that he is the recipient of divine revelation? Is there something about the nature of the experience that makes it self-warranting, or does it require some sort of outside confirmation? When someone makes a claim to have received divine revelation, how do we know that it is true?

### *Doctrinal Authority*

Sources for doctrinal teachings according to the Shi'ah are to be found in the Qur'ân, *hadîth* (narrations attributed to the Prophet and Imams), and reason. It is the responsibility of every sane adult Muslim to figure out the basic principles of religious doctrine without imitation of a scholar. This does not mean that one cannot make use of scholars' expositions and explanations to understand the basic principles, but one must arrive at a judgment that these principles are true by one's own lights with the help of God, and not simply by parroting.

## **Prescriptive Authority and Revelation**

Do right and wrong depend on the command of God as expressed through revelation? What gives revealed prescriptions and prohibitions their moral authority? According to the Shi'ites, reason is capable of grasping basic moral principles, but revelation is needed to perfect one's moral understanding as guided by the revealed law.

### *Communal Religious Authority and Revelation*

The prophets are given positions of religious leadership because of revelation, but it is not merely the reception of revelation that conveys religious authority. God chose the prophets to be recipients because of their excellences, both innate and acquired. In Islam, other religious leaders gain authority through designation or through knowledge. With regard to practice, every sane adult Muslim must either learn to derive the rules from their sources or to imitate someone who can.

***Political Authority and Revelation***

There are a variety of views on this subject within both the Mennonite and Shi'ite communities. Here too are many common themes. Both groups have challenged political authorities on the basis of conflict with religious principles. For this reason, both have been accused of being rebellious, and at the fringes of the Anabaptist and Shi'ite traditions have been rebels taking extreme positions. For the most part, however, Mennonite and Shi'ite leaders have been content to respect just political authorities that did not interfere with their own practice of religion. Both communities have sought, insofar as feasible, autonomy.

Although many Mennonites today view these tendencies as endorsing secular government, I suggest this is a distortion. Anabaptists called for political and religious authorities to tolerate them, to cease oppression of their groups, and to let them live in peace. This did not require that there be no established religion, and certainly they would not have preferred avowedly agnostic magistrates to Christian ones. When secular governments demanded Anabaptists carry arms and go to war, they often disobeyed and suffered persecution and imprisonment for it. The criterion for obedience to government was that there should be no conflict with religious duties.

Shi'ite history has also seen a strong effort to attain autonomy, whether through respect for political authorities that did not interfere with the religious practice of the Shi'ah or through the establishment of government based on the authority of the jurispudent. The criterion for Shi'ite political thought has been to insure the ability to observe religious obligations.

I don't mean to suggest that there are no fundamental differences between Shi'ite and Mennonite theological teachings about politics. Mennonites separate the institutions of Church and State in such a way that the State must have functions that cannot be performed by the Church, because the authority of the sword in the hands of the magistrates is to be accepted "in so far as they are not contrary to the Word of God. Rom. 13:1-3."<sup>7</sup> In Islam, at least in its origins, there was no separation of temporal and spiritual authority. However, the institutional separation of which Menno speaks is not the religious neutrality of the modern secular state. Menno calls on magistrates to be good Christians and to uphold the laws against sodomy, adultery, idolatry, and much else that is considered none of the business of the modern secular

state, but to avoid bloodshed while doing so. This implies that at least some important strands in Mennonite thought are less in line with contemporary liberal secularism than is often assumed. Menno seemed to advocate the state's tolerance of the peaceful coexistence of different Christian denominations. The state was to serve to ensure order and not to enforce any particular sectarian belief system, but at the same time toleration was not to be extended as far as the permission, say, of witchcraft.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Muhammad Baqir Saeedi Rowshan, "Revelation in the Qur'an," *The Message of Thaqalayn*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2, 1417/1996, 23-40.

<sup>2</sup> "A Christian Declaration on the Authority of the Scriptures (General Conference Mennonite Church, 1962): a CMEQ Source Document."

<sup>3</sup> See Al-Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Musawí al-Khu'i and Abdulaziz Sachedrina, *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 34:28, 35:24, 41:4.

<sup>6</sup> The idea that no corruptions need be attributed to the gospels and that the term *book* (*kitàb*) in the Qur'an need not refer literally to a book composed of chapters and sentences has been argued most famously by Ayatullah Ma'rifat.

<sup>7</sup> Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 200.

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*Muhammad Legenhausen is a professor at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran.*

## Reason and Revelation

*Mohammad Ali Shomali*

There are four sources on which, from a Shi'a point of view, any investigation about Islam has to be based: the Glorious Qur'an, the Sunnah, reason, and consensus. After a careful consideration of these four sources, it becomes clear that the Qur'an and the Sunnah are both originated from revelation and that consensus is reducible to the Sunnah. Therefore, there are two types of sources: (1) the Qur'an and the Sunnah that constitute the revealed or transmitted sources, and (2) reason or intellect that constitutes the rational source.

This does not mean that every single enquiry must be based on *all* the aforementioned sources; rather, there is no way to establish the truths other than referring to one or more of those sources. Some fields of study are completely intellectual, such as natural theology or philosophy; others are purely based on revealed information, such as revealed theology; and yet others rely on both, such as law and morality.<sup>1</sup>

When Muslim scholars mention the Qur'an and the Sunnah as revealed sources, this does not mean they do not believe in previous revelations. Indeed, it is part of Islamic faith to confirm all the previous prophets and revelations. The only problem is how to identify them. Whenever something is known to represent a religious fact or a general rule revealed previously by God, that too is certainly accepted. Thus, we can conclude that there are two major *common* ways to understand and discover religious truths: revelation and reason.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Status of Reason**

Islam regards reason as one of the greatest blessings bestowed by God on human beings. It is by means of reason that we understand ourselves and the world around us, and that we realize the necessity of investigating our origin and the One who has created us. If we had no reason, we would not be responsible for our acts or beliefs. In Shi'i Islam in particular, great emphasis is placed on reason and the rational sciences. This emphasis derives from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams of his household. The Qur'an says in several verses: "Surely there are signs in this for those who ponder" (13:4; 16:12; 30:24).

The Qur'an also condemns more than once those who do not think or use their reason. The following two traditions, selected from the large number of hadiths available on the subject, show the place of reason in Shi'a belief. One Imam says: "Whoever has intellect has faith and whoever has faith will enter Paradise." With reason one comes to understand the truth, to believe in Islam and follow the teachings of the Prophet, and consequently to be able to enter Paradise. In an insightful hadith addressing one of his companions, an Imam said:

With reason God completes His proof. God has equipped His prophets with the ability of expressing their ideas in a way that all people can understand. God has shown people His lordship through reason.

Then the Imam recited the following verse of the Glorious Qur'an, "Your God is the One God, there is no god but God who is the Compassionate the Merciful. . . . Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of days and night, and in the ships that move in the sea, and in the rain that descends from the sky to bring life on the earth, and all kinds of animals that God has spread over the earth, and also in the movement of the wind and the clouds which God has kept between the earth and the sky—in all these there are signs for those who are thoughtful." Then the Imam said: "Allah has made these signs a proof to show people that they have a Creator Who arranges everything for them and Who directs everything, because God then says, 'Surely there are signs in these facts for those who use their reason.'" Many other references to the Qur'an are made in this tradition to show that God in His final message considers reason as the only means by which human beings become responsible and come to understand the truth. All questions on the Day of Judgement are proportionate to the rational capacity of people. Those who have been given greater intelligence will be questioned more deeply than ordinary people.

### **Different Roles of Reason**

In general, reason contributes to religious sciences in three major areas. The first is to understand the realities of the world, such as the existence of God, the truth of religion, and scientifically established truths. The second is to

present moral and legal principles, such as the wrongness of oppression and the rightness of justice. The third is to set up standards and logical processes for reasoning and inference. All three roles of reason are recognized and, indeed, encouraged in Islam.

The first step towards religion, inquiring into it and searching for its truth, is taken by reason. It is reason that drives us to take the issue seriously and tells us our interests would be harmed if the claims of religion are true and we fail to discover and believe in them. Once we have started our researches and investigations, it is reason that instructs us on how to think and how to argue. It is also reason that tells us to be fair, pious, truth-seeking, and committed to the truth during and after the entire process of rational discovery.

We cannot say that one must believe in God or Islam simply because God says so or because the Qur'an requires it. We cannot even say that one has to investigate the truth of religion simply because the religion itself tells us to do so. It is reason that urges us to enquire about religion and thereby discover the veracity of the Qur'an and the Prophet. Reason thus has a crucial role with respect to religious belief. Everyone must make his or her own enquiry regarding religion and discover the truth independently, and no one can rely on others. Of course, once the truth of a given prophet or book is established, many further truths can be learnt from that prophet or that book.

In respect to practical laws and moral values, the relevant principles are understood by reason. Details are, of course, provided by religious sources, although the process of understanding the scriptures and the implications of religious judgments again are governed by reason. For example, if God says that we must perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, it rationally implies that we must make all necessary preparations, such as buying tickets or obtaining a visa. If there is a conflict between two obligations, such as saving an innocent life and performing our prayers, what should we do? In this case, even if there is no explicit or particular religious instruction, we still rationally understand that we must act according to the certain and clear judgment of our reason, which is to save the person's life.

In contrast, the role of revelation or scripture in religious sciences can be summed up as follows: (1) confirming truths already known by reason; (2)

presenting new subjects not known by reason, such as the details of the resurrection and detailed injunctions of moral and legal systems;<sup>3</sup> and (3) establishing due recompense sanctions through the religiously determined system of reward and punishment.

Here I should make two points. First, one has to distinguish between decisive and certain rational judgments and actions such as guessing, personal opinions, or weak arguments. There have always been some people who introduce their ideas as enjoying rational grounds (even they themselves think this), while after consideration it becomes clear there is no basis for such claims. Consider here those who represent their ideas as Islamic ideas, while religious sources do not support them in any known way.

Second, although the reason is recognized as an independent source of knowledge, it has its limits. On many things reason has no judgment and is silent, because they are beyond its scope. Therefore, there might be many things that we can grasp by other means, such as perception, intuition, or revelation, that do not fall within the scope of reason. You cannot really understand through rational arguments what a rose smells like or how a mother feels when her child is dead. In respect to religious issues, many facts are not knowable by reason, such as many details of the resurrection. What is important is that there is nothing in Islam that contradicts the reason.

Thus, we should not make our acceptance of religious facts depend on finding a rational proof or justification for them, though they must be rationally possible. The Qur'an sometimes uses the expression "vision" and attributes it to the heart for a type of knowledge much higher than perception and rational knowledge.

### **Role of Reason in Understanding Moral Values**

Now let us consider the role of reason in understanding what is morally good and bad, what is right and wrong. This has been an important issue for all religious traditions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to "divine command theory," good or morally right means "commanded by God," and bad or morally wrong means forbidden by God."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, some theologians have argued for a rational approach to ethics. They believe there are independent criteria of good and bad that can be understood by our reason. In other words, the religious believer has no special access to moral truth;

God has made all people rational. For both believer and non-believer, making a reasonable moral judgment is a matter of listening to reason and following it. God's commands are not arbitrary, and we can exercise rational methods to discover moral norms. Among Muslim theologians, the Ash'arites held the former view and the Mu'tazilites and the Shi'a held the latter.

According to the Ash'arites, all values are determined by the will of God, and moral concepts such as "good" and "right" have no meaning other than "that which God wills" or "what is commanded by God." These words have no objective meaning. According to the Shi'a and the Mu'tazilites, values such as justice and goodness have a real existence, independent of anyone's will, even God's. Values are objective. Are good and evil rational or revealed? The Shi'a and the Mu'tazilites believed that good and evil are objective and therefore can be known rationally. Allamah Hilli, a great Shi'a scholar, writes: The principle on which the problems concerning justice depend is that God is the Wise, He never does an evil action and He never fails to perform any obligatory action. When this principle is proved questions concerning justice, such as goodness of obligation, necessity of Grace and the like are constructed upon that. And since this principle depends on knowing good and evil and their rationality, the author started his discussion with these.

Elsewhere he says:

Imamites and their followers, the Mu'tazilites, believe that goodness and badness of some actions are known by the reason evidently such as our knowledge of goodness of beneficial telling truth and badness of harmful lies, on which no reasonable person have doubt, and his certainty about this is not weaker than his certainty about the need of a contingent being [in its existence] to a cause or about the equality of two things which are each equal to a third thing. They believe that there are some actions, understanding of whose goodness or badness needs reflection such as goodness of harmful telling truth and badness of beneficial lies, and finally that there are some actions, on which the reason is unable to make judgement and their goodness and badness is to be expressed by the religious law, *Sha'ia*, such as [how to perform] worship.

On the other hand, there are the Ash'arites who deny the rationality of goodness and badness. Shahrestani describes their idea as follows:

All obligations are to be learnt from the scriptures. The reason does not make anything obligatory and does not make anything deserve to be considered as good or bad. Thus, knowing God becomes possible by reason and becomes obligatory by the scripture. God, the most High, says: “We have never chastised unless we have despatched some messenger” (Q 17:15). Similarly, gratitude to the blessing-giver, rewarding the obedient and punishing the disobedient all become obligatory by the revealed, and not the reason.

In contrast, the Shi’a and the Mu’tazilites have argued that if goodness and badness were just religious and not understandable by the reason, unbelievers would not recognize them today or before they knew of revelation, e.g., the Qur’an. But we know that there are many common values and moral principles among both theists and atheists. ‘Abd al-Jabbar, a great Mu’tazilite theologian, says: “any sane person knows his obligations even though he does not know that there is a commander and forbider.”

The Qur’an in fact implies in many statements that knowledge of what is obligatory, good, and evil is accessible to everyone, as in “Surely God bids to justice and good-doing and giving to kinsmen, and He forbids indecency, dishonor and insolence” (Q 16:92). These virtues and vices must have been seen as such prior to revelation. The objectivity of ethical value is asserted or implied all through the Qur’an. For instance, the repeated commands of God to do what is right would be empty of force and spirit if they meant only “commands to do what He commands.” It is even harder to make sense of statements that God is always just to His servants on the supposition that “just” means “commanded by God.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Al-Ghazali divides theological issues into those known only through religious sources, those known only with the intellect, and those known in both ways. He mentions the visibility of God as an example of the first category, and exclusiveness of creating movements to God as an example of the second. In respect to cases where both intellect and transmitted knowledge have judgment, he adds that whenever we receive something from religious sources, we must see what the rational judgment is. If intellect allows us to do so, we have to follow those sources. But if that is rationally impossible, we must interpret the text in another way, since

there is no disharmony or contradiction between religion and intellect. Then, al-Ghazali adds that in cases where intellect is silent, again we must accept and follow the demands of religious sources. He insists that rational permission for the possibility of something is not required. What is really required is to be free from rational impossibility. "There is a [subtle] difference between these two, which unintelligent people sometimes fail to recognise."

<sup>2</sup> Things understood through personal intuitions or mystical experiences are valid for the person who has had these intuitions or experiences and is certain about the truth and validity of them or beliefs based on them. However, these are not included in our discussion here, since this sort of knowledge cannot be communicated through discussion or argumentation to others. The only way to learn and accept these issues is to undergo the same experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Having verified the truth of the Prophet or the Qur'an, we come to know many things that we were unable to know by ourselves because of our lack of access to certain realms of reality or certain evidence.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, George Hourani says: "It [the Ash'arite view, or what he calls 'theistic subjectivism,' or what others call 'ethical voluntarism'] is not peculiar to Islam, since it occurs in medieval Judaism and occasionally in western thought; but it was probably more prominent and widespread in Islam than in any other civilization." (G. F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* [Cambridge UP, 1985], 57.)

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*Mohammad Ali Shomali is a professor at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran.*

# **The Bible as Canon and as Word of God: Exploring the Mystery of Revelation**

*Lydia Harder*

## **Introduction**

The focus in this paper will be on the Bible and the way Christians speak theologically about its authority and function. This will be an exercise in systematic theology — that is, a rational exploration of revelation and authority from within the Christian faith. Thus my first purpose is not apologetic but doctrinal, concerned with exploring issues that arise for Christians in trying to understand the authority of the Bible. My hope is that this will raise questions for us all and that a fruitful discussion can happen as we gain a deeper understanding of each other's scriptures.

I want to begin by rejecting two philosophically oriented approaches to the theological theme of revelation that have developed within Modernity. Both of these restrict the notion of revelation too much for my purposes and thus do not allow full expression of the truth that Christians confess.<sup>1</sup> First, revelation is often understood as a feature of a generally theistic metaphysical outlook that could be explored generically without reference to the particularities of the Christian community's beliefs about God. In this approach, biblical revelation is usually evaluated in terms of that independent general definition, and the process of reading the Bible easily becomes one of separating the revelational or universal from the specific aspects of language and history. Revelation is then viewed as a deposit of knowledge about God that must by definition be universal. This creates a dualism between the particular and the universal that tends to undermine some of the most powerful teachings of the Christian faith, such as the incarnation and the sacraments. Both of these are relational notions that bridge the universal and the particular through the action of God.

A second, closely related direction taken by many contemporary theologians is to start with epistemological warrants accepted in philosophy in order to justify the possibility of revelation. In this model, revelation becomes the foundational teaching on which all subsequent teachings are erected. Deductive reasoning from that premise establishes the other teachings. When the Bible is then equated with revelation, its authority is directly dependent on

epistemological reasoning rather than on the acknowledgment of God's life-giving presence within the worshiping and witnessing community in the power of the Spirit. This makes the apologetic question more basic than an understanding of the God of the Christian faith who determines the community's own identity and mission.

Instead of these directions, I wish to explore the network of beliefs about God that are illuminated when Christians claim that the Bible has authority. Authority in this context refers to "that which (or the person whom) one has reason to trust": that is, it is a relational word.<sup>2</sup> When we are convinced that someone or something will lead us to truthful action and honest speech in tune with the true nature of reality, we accept that person or thing as having legitimate authority. This definition moves us toward an exploration of biblical authority within a view of the larger divine-human relationship.

I will begin with the notion of "canon" in order to focus on the "creaturely reality" of the Bible. I begin here, not because it is the most important way to begin, but because the natural way people of all religions meet the Bible for the first time is as a set of texts written by humans. Much attention has been paid in the age of Modernity to the historical process of canonization as well as to the final shape of the biblical canon. However, the theological implications of this fact have not often been explicated. I will suggest some of them for the theme of revelation and authority.

Secondly, I will explore the linguistic term commonly used of the Bible, "Word of God." I will suggest that this term is a metaphor. Again, much attention has been paid in Modernity to language and how it is used to give meaning to experience. I will explore the metaphorical nature of the linguistic term in order to help describe what is implied when I suggest that the Bible is a "sacrament" of God.

### **The Bible as Canon**

"Canon," used as a formal literary category, is not unique to sacred writings. The term originates from the Greek *kanôn*, a measuring rod or reed or standard. In classical Greek, it was applied to collections of authoritative writings and to several kinds of lists and tables. Its formal use as a designation for the collection of Christian biblical books began in the fourth century when the parameters of the collection were being settled by official action of the church. However, lists of books used authoritatively in the church have also been

discovered from as early as the second century CE. The notion of canon implies boundaries around a particular book designated for a particular normative purpose. The focus on the canonical process during Modernity has highlighted the need to look again at that process and to ask what it means theologically. A brief overview of how this collection came to be will highlight some of the important transitions in how Scripture was viewed.

We begin with the formation of the Christian Scriptures in the first Century CE.<sup>3</sup> The church inherited a canon from Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures (later named the Old Testament), made up of several different collections of writings including the law, the prophets, wisdom, and the Psalms. Central to the notion of authority of these writings was their connection to the formation of a covenant community through God's saving intervention in the events of the Exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the law at Sinai. The foundational notion of Hebrew Scriptures was as Torah, understood as divinely issued decrees and commands, mediated through Moses and intended as a normative guide for the people. These laws were placed within a narrative context that firmly tied these writings to the community and its experience of God's saving presence at different stages of its life.

These decrees required interpretation, traditionally given by scribes and based on applying the law to present circumstances. But it was the prophets who carried the authority of divine speech more directly. They were recognized as inspired by the Spirit of God speaking as God's messengers for specific situations. The collection of their writings was second only to the Torah in authority. The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures was made up of a miscellaneous collection of writings of multiple genres and voices. Included were practical wisdom teachings, needed by the community as it interacted with the society around it, as well as Psalms of praise and lament that testify to the close relationship between God and people.

Thus Christians inherited a diverse and dynamic group of texts, read and interpreted within a "text-centered" community.<sup>4</sup> These scriptures were not handed down from heaven in a single moment, but were made up of texts selected over time amidst controversy about exactly which books should be considered sacred Scripture. Regardless of where the boundaries were placed, the Hebrew Scriptures were viewed as witnessing most centrally to the one eternal unchanging God within the dynamic of the history of God's revelation to, and salvation of, God's people. The unifying factor of the Bible as canon

was not a theme or concept but the “Integrity of Reality, the oneness of God, to which all the parts, in one way or another, when joined together, point and testify.”<sup>5</sup>

Christians accepted this view and saw the function of these writings as a witness to God’s active presence among them through the inspiration of the Scriptures, which were therefore useful in learning how to live a God-pleasing life as individuals and as community. II Tim. 3:16 in the New Testament supports this view:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.<sup>6</sup>

But with the coming of Jesus, the notion of Scripture needed to be transformed in order to witness to this startling new reality. The book of Hebrews in the NT suggests that God had spoken in a new way through Jesus:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Heb. 1:1)

For early Christians the primary agent of divine revelation was not Scripture per se but Jesus Christ to whom Scripture bears witness. They were convinced that they were living in a new age of the Spirit, that God was not just a God of memory of the past but a God active in the present through Jesus. Although the earthly Jesus was no longer present, these Christians were certain that the risen Christ, the living voice of God among them, was still there through the apostolic witnesses and the preaching by the early leaders. The collections of narratives about Jesus, the sayings of Jesus, and the pastoral letters written to groups of believers were circulated as testimonies to the presence of the living Christ through the Spirit. The notion of the inspiration of these witnesses made explicit a comparison to prophetic literature that closely associated the authoritative reading aloud of the Scriptures with the prophecy spoken by God through the Holy Spirit.

It wasn’t until the time of Irenaeus (180 CE) that we can speak with any confidence of a Christian Bible seen as a selection of authoritative writings

that incorporated the new understanding of God's will through Jesus Christ directly into the existing Scripture. The involvement of the Christian community in the selection process is clear. Phyllis Bird suggests that "Truth in representing the tradition and suitability for meeting the current needs were the twin tests of authority in the creation of the Christian Bible."<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny that official recognition included a political process of human decision making.

As we move to a more directly theological account of this activity, we will not deny this human, creaturely process. We will admit that it is vulnerable to abuse and misuse. However, we will focus on God and try to understand this process within the larger context of how Christians see God's relationship to the creaturely world. The central question is, Who is this God who would trust a human community and a human process to be the witness to the eternal presence of God in the world? Or, put another way, What is it about the canonical process that would make Christians trust it to be a faithful witness to God's activity in the world?

The answer Christians give to this question is congruent with the description of God given in the substance of the Bible itself. The Christian picture of God is not of invulnerable divine power, a God without passions committed only to control and judgment of creation. Instead, both the content and the shape of the canon witness to a God whose perfect love makes God vulnerable and willing to be rejected, a God who invites reconciliation but does not force it on his creatures.<sup>8</sup> This is characteristic of love, which is willing to put itself in danger for the other. This kind of love is most clearly embodied in Jesus, who endured suffering and the cross in order to make God's love concretely present in the world. This is a radical, surprising idea, a notion that humans would not have naturally assumed to be true. This picture of God could come about only through God's own self-disclosure.

Christians confess that God has always chosen to make God-self present through particular revelatory actions. Revelation is regarded as self-disclosure through divine presence: "To speak of revelation is to say that God is one whose being is directed toward his creatures, and the goal of whose free self-movement is his presence with us."<sup>9</sup> Revelation is not so much information, though it includes that. It is rather God presenting God-self as outgoing and communicative, willing to address the creaturely reality of humankind. Thus revelation is cognitive, but also moral and relational. The trinitarian formulation of the one God is a way Christians speak about this

mystery. They confess the origin of this self-presence in the free action of the Creator God, the actualization of this presence through the incarnated Christ, and the ongoing effective presence of God within human history through the Spirit, who will bring all things to an eschatological and eternal perfection.

This revelation is purposive, but also mysterious and beyond human comprehension. Its purpose is the overcoming of human opposition, alienation, and sin and their replacement with knowledge, love, and fear of God. It creates the possibility of communion between God and God's creation by positively inviting reconciliation through the removal of human barriers such as ignorance, self-centeredness, and sinful rejection of God's way. Yet it is not direct or without ambiguity. The revelation of God is not merely a means of dealing with epistemological questions, but is rather a divine action of mercy throughout time and eternity directed toward reconciliation of God's creatures. It is a "setting apart" or "sanctification" of creaturely reality (including the Bible) to serve God's particular disclosive purpose.

### **Authority of the Canon**

How then do we speak about the canon's authority? Perhaps one of the best terms is as "testimony" or "witness" to God's presence in particular moments within a larger context of relationship. As testimony the Bible points to a reality beyond itself, that is, to God. But as testimony it is also a fitting creaturely servant of God in its vulnerability. It witnesses to a God who has chosen not to dominate human creatures but to invite their free response in loving obedience to God's loving actions.

This ties the Bible very closely to the community of faith, the church. This community confesses its purpose is to listen expectantly for the Word of God as the Bible is read; rejoices in worship as God's presence becomes a reality among the people through the Spirit's activity; and discerns the particular word for the present time and place through that activity among the people. This creaturely activity of hearing continues the human role of recognizing God's revelation and salvation, much as was done through the canonization process. However, this too cannot be spiritualized; it includes reading the Bible using all the usual tools—construing the meaning of words and sentences, following arguments, grasping relationships, and making reasoned judgments about the truth of the statements and their relevance for the present situation.

At the same time, the expectation and hope is affirmed that God will bring all creaturely reality and activity to its fulfillment within God's eternal purpose, because God has chosen to be in relationship with his creation. All of this is part of the larger human response to God that we call discipleship — that is, a faithful following in the way of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

At least two important consequences follow from this way of looking at the authority of the canon.

(1) The inherent authority of the canon will always be somewhat unsettled, never completely secure or totally exclusive, because it admits there is divine disclosure beyond what can be enclosed in a human book. This will always make the Bible less than absolute, because it can only witness to God's presence but not control it. God is free to extend God's presence within history when and where God wills. The temptation is to try to make the Bible totally secure by insisting it is a divine book and thus has absolute authority. The church has often used external means such as coercion, domination, and suppression to ensure the Bible's authority. As Christendom became a reality, church and state joined hands in ensuring its authority was extended to all nations. One aspect of this domination was the forced conversion of the so-called barbarians. Later, both the Inquisition (with its authority to stamp out heresy) and colonial expansion (with its authority to impose Christian rule) sought to spread the Bible's authority using coercive methods. Mennonite forebears, the Anabaptists, experienced some of this violent oppression in the name of Biblical authority. So did many Muslims at various times in history.

As a result of the Enlightenment and its focus on humanistic approaches to knowledge, the western church has struggled to find ways to express the relationship of God to the Bible. As the church splintered into various communities, it began to develop confessions of faith arranged systematically and comprehensively in order to secure and defend the divine voice against what were considered heretical interpretations. Timeless truths were abstracted from the multiple voices within Scripture and given absolute authority. Gradually, new terms such as "inerrant" and "verbally inspired" were used to insist on the technical accuracy of the biblical words. The work of the Holy Spirit was now seen as primarily securing the accuracy of those words. As John Howard Yoder shows, these attempts were all ways of making the creaturely Bible as secure as God.<sup>11</sup> They became idolatrous when they

insisted on boundaries that were too fixed and static, unable to point beyond themselves to the God who was using the Bible for God's own purposes.

(2) The nature of the canon as testimony means it will always invite further interpretation as God's activity of self-disclosure is continually being extended into human time and space. The ambiguity and complexity of the narratives, commands, wisdom, and prayers in the biblical material means no one text can be allowed to overpower all others, nor can one interpretation be the final one. As Brevard Childs puts it, readers of the Bible, fully aware of their own frailty, await "in anticipation a fresh illumination through God's Spirit, for whom the Bible's frailty is no barrier."<sup>12</sup> The Bible becomes the arena where God continually invites humans to be transformed into loving people responding in obedience to God's presence. The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is rather a "script," always reread, through which the Spirit brings forth new possibilities to live life in God's presence. There is an open dynamic in the text itself, so that nobody's reading is final or inerrant. God is always beyond us in "holy hiddenness."

The multiple interpretations of the Bible were threatened in Modernity by a new locus of interpretation, one largely outside of ecclesial control whether Catholic or Protestant. The Enlightenment gradually gave authority to the secular university, where the biblical book was treated much as any other historical book. Historical critical studies threatened to undermine any divine voice at all within the Scriptures. Attention was on historical fact, attempting to separate it from interpretation and to find the one meaning intended by the original author. One disastrous legacy of the Enlightenment was the new confidence that humans could stand outside of the stream of time, and with clear rationality distinguish truth from error and light from darkness. The focus was now not on recognizing God's self-disclosure but on analyzing the human events behind Scripture. Various exegetical methods were employed to get to the original historical events, including those of Jesus' life and death. In that context, the authority of the Bible for faith became more and more elusive.

Yet, throughout this time many churches kept on testifying that the living God became present in their midst as the Bible was read within a community committed to hearing the witness to God through the Bible. Also, those formerly excluded from biblical interpretation—for example, women, and persons from different cultures and languages—began to lift up passages

long ignored. The living God continued to be present with his creatures through a variety of interpretive activity, as God's dynamic Spirit moved among God's people.

What then can we say about biblical authority that arises from a theological understanding of the canon? We are left with the particularity of human interpretive activity within history, which can never guarantee God's presence but witnesses to the promise that God will again and again reveal and save. According to John Howard Yoder, that is precisely where we ought to be, "since that is where God chose to be revealed in all the arbitrariness and particularity of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Jeremiah, Jesus and Pentecost, Luke and Paul, Peter and John."<sup>13</sup> As Christians stand within that large tradition of receiving God's revelation, they are continually tested and judged in terms of the witness of the past. Thus the Bible's authority is expressed most often in terms of challenges for transformation and renewal. The God who has chosen to reveal God-self through the particular mediation of creaturely beings made useful through the Spirit is the same kind of God who was vulnerable to human rejection on the cross. What seems at first to be weakness is strength, because God's willingness to be vulnerable calls forth a willing human response of love. Within that relationship of love, people become convinced of the inherent authority of the Bible. They recognize its congruence with how God's presence always comes to God's people, not overpowering or domineering but inviting, moving us beyond our present understanding into God's mysterious presence.

### **The Bible as "Word of God"**

Faith affirmations such as affirming the Bible as God's word are of a different nature than merely scientific or philosophical truth statements. They are more akin to poetic discourse, which arises from the experience of historical reality but moves to the realm of the unseen. The term "sacrament" is a traditional way to speak of these realities.

The expression "word of God" is first of all metaphorical. It cannot be taken literally, for God is Spirit and therefore it is absurd to suggest divine speech is the same as human speech. Recent semantic studies of metaphor have helped us see its potential in religious language about God. Since understanding metaphor and symbol will be helpful in understanding sacrament,

I will briefly summarize the work of Sandra Schneiders (based on that of Paul Ricoeur) to point out some key characteristics of this kind of language.<sup>14</sup> Metaphor is not merely a contracted simile or a literary ornament, an illustration or a substitute for a literal meaning. It is a powerful form of language in its own right, a power gained because of the irresolvable tension within the term itself. In a metaphor, an affirmative proposition is given, but simultaneously a negation is implied in the likeness between the two terms. For example, in the terms of the metaphor “the Bible is the word of God,” the tension implies that the Bible is, but also is not, the word of God. This tension makes the metaphor alive and calls forth its strong meaning.

Ricoeur has explored what happens when one makes a proposition in a sentence such as “the Bible is the word of God.” The sentence makes sense grammatically but not literally. Thus the imagination must be engaged in a cognitive and affective exploration of the two terms in order to move to a different level of understanding. That is when a new meaning emerges. We therefore resort to metaphor in order to bring to speech something that cannot be expressed in literal speech. If either the “is” or the “is not” is suppressed, the metaphor becomes only literal or an exercise of sheer fancy. Though most metaphors are unstable and become banal and trite through repetition, some retain a perennial power to evoke response. They are root metaphors that draw out rich understandings of the most complex realities of our life.

It is helpful to see that we are dealing with metaphor in order to explore the referent of the sentence, “The Bible is the word of God.” This referent is divine revelation—a revelation not restricted to the confines of human language. For some people, this metaphor is dead because they can see the Bible only as another religious book. The “is” has ceased to function for them. For others, the metaphor becomes literalized. They have ceased to hear the whispered “is not” that a live metaphor always carries in its affirmation. They regard every word as equally and fully divine and thus absolutely true. Interpretation is reduced to finding this literal meaning of every word, suggesting that then they can perfectly grasp the divine meaning. The mystery of divine revelation is improvised and distorted by limiting it to a human proposition.

Because of the metaphorical nature of the Bible as word of God, the language of the Bible invites and indeed requires interpretation and translation.

The object of interpretation is revelation in all its richness and complexity. The significance of revelation always overflows the boundaries of our own language. Therefore, we are free to translate the Bible into many tongues and cultures, confident that God's disclosure is not limited to one particular articulation of it. In addition, if we define revelation as self-disclosure, we realize immediately that the word of God cannot be only rational but must be more holistic than that. In personal disclosure we share with another something of ourselves, whether physical, emotional, or intellectual. Language is the symbolic medium of that self-disclosure. So, too, with God's self-disclosure: something true is shared but the disclosure goes beyond rational discourse alone.

Symbol and metaphor are related, in that both include the affirmation and the negation within themselves. What is important to understand is that a symbol is a perceptible reality that points to what is otherwise imperceptible. A symbol embodies and brings to expression reality that it can never fully say. It moves into the area of the unseen and the inexpressible. Thus symbols hide more than they reveal, and there is always ambiguity about a symbol's meaning. We use expressions such as "nature speaks to us" or "history teaches us," knowing they are symbolic expressions putting into language what is often inexpressible. Thus our theological expressions are, at their linguistic level, symbolic.

Theologically, we also say that to be accessible to us, God approached us symbolically through perceptible reality. God opened a locus of encounter through created nature, historical events, oracles of the prophets, wisdom of the sages, and prayers of the people. Christians recognized Jesus, the living Word, as the definitive revelation of God, the very presence of God in human form. The proclamation of this event by the early witnesses was itself revelatory, because it invited those who heard the preaching to respond to God's self-disclosure. The term "word of God" embraces and integrates this whole range of God's symbolic self-disclosure.

Christians believe that Jesus as "Word of God" is the "paradigmatic instance of divine revelation" and the scriptures are the privileged medium of God's gift of God's self to humankind. Historically, the church has used the term "sacrament" to denote this kind of symbol. A sacrament articulates the mystery of the divine encounter in a particularly clear, powerful way. As a

visible sign of invisible grace it witnesses to the presence of God. Therefore, the church as worshipping community and the Bible as witnessing Word can be seen as God's sacrament to the world. The proper reference of the church as "body of Christ" (a term the New Testament uses) and the Bible as "word of God" is God's presence with God's people.

### **Bible as Sacrament**

The tension noted earlier when discussing metaphor remains when we speak of the Bible as sacrament. The Bible is not revelation in its fullness, but a symbolic witness to the self-gift that has been taking place since creation and will continue to the end of time. Because symbols are inherently ambiguous, interpretation will always be a challenging work, simultaneously revealing and concealing. Perhaps that is why, within the Bible, the concern is not on whether God reveals but on human openness to hear and believe that revelation. The gospel of John puts it this way:

But these (signs) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

Throughout his life Jesus challenges his disciples to hear the word at a deeper level: "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen" (Mark 4:9). Hearing and seeing are used metaphorically for the disciples' sensitive openness to the gospel message and their obedience to it. The Bible is a medium of God's self-revelation in this sense, so that those with ears to hear will encounter the living God. Yet, this also means that revelation is inaccessible to those not open to hearing the "unseen reality" there to be understood.

Jesus as a human person could be perceived by everyone. However, Jesus as the revelation of God, the living Word of God, was only "seen" and "heard" by those open to that reality. The kind of authority that the Bible as Word of God has is therefore authority within a divine-human relationship that transforms our hearing ability to an openness to the unseen. To respond to God's word is to be changed, to be initiated into a reality that one can participate in, at deeper and deeper levels. Thus we do not speak only about the Bible's normativity as a source for dogma or commandments. Instead we affirm that the Bible is a primary symbolic invitation into relationship with the

divine being. It is a sacrament by which God's grace is made present through the Living Word.

The Bible can be studied as a human text without the transformation of the human person that results when the Word is truly heard. The anti-sacramental views of the early Anabaptists, forebears of the Mennonites, had to do with how the sacramental actions of the church were being set apart and used by the hierarchy to control access to God. These Anabaptists insisted there was no power in the physical elements themselves. The bread used in a ritual was just ordinary bread. So, too, no one group of interpreters should be given the authority to control access to God; nor should the Bible be seen as a supernatural or exclusive book. However, the Bible does become a sacrament of God when persons faithfully interpret the words and the congregation is open to God's presence through the Word.

The Bible can also be spiritualized so that the actual ordinary meaning of the words is unimportant for what individuals understand as spiritual interpretation. This was a temptation for the spiritualists among the early Anabaptists. This would suggest that God cannot enter the created world in order to communicate with his creation but must remain separated from it. Mennonites in their own ongoing history have struggled with this view as well. What they have insisted on is that God does not force a response of faith but issues an invitation to those who would listen. God's authority is like the claim of a friend to fidelity and love—always on the level of an appeal that can be responded to or resisted. The “word of God” as sacrament implies that the Bible is the word of God but can also be used so that it is not the word of God. The Bible as sacrament therefore points to God's willingness to become vulnerable to human response. Yet that vulnerability creates the willing and loving response of God's people.

### **Conclusion**

I am not sure how the term “canon” and the expression “word of God” resonate with Muslims. However, whether these terms have parallels in Islamic writings is not the most crucial item for discussion in a Mennonite–Shi'ite dialogue. Instead, I hope we can focus our discussions on our understanding of the attributes and activities of God that we see in our respective scriptures and that we associate with revelation. In addition, I hope we can begin to

address those times when our misuse of our scriptures has led to domination and abuse of the other.

I have tried to say there is vulnerability about the way Christians speak about the Bible as canon and as word of God. This vulnerability is there because the Bible is human, historical, and linguistic; but it has not always been understood and has led to misuses and abuses. Yet this very vulnerability contains within itself a powerful witness to the kind of God that Christians worship and obey. It testifies to God's revealing and reconciling presence in history, a presence calling forth a free response of love and obedience by God's people. By acknowledging the authority of the Bible, Christians witness to what they consider the most basic truth of all: that the powerful, omnipotent, and merciful God initiates relationship with his creation through his revealing and reconciling presence. I hope that this paper and the discussion to follow will help create mutual understandings between Mennonites and Shi'ites. May God be acknowledged and praised through our dialogue.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, "The Inspired Word of God: Authority and Inspiration," in Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God* (Fortress, 1998), 14.

<sup>3</sup> A good overview of this process is found in Phyllis Bird, "The Authority of the Bible," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.1, 33-64.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>5</sup> James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Augsburg Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Holy Bible, NRSV. I use this translation throughout the paper.

<sup>7</sup> Bird, 49.

<sup>8</sup> See William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Westminster/John Knox, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Webster's articulation of this also in the following section.

<sup>10</sup> I have explored biblical interpretation as discipleship in my book, *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark* (Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> John Howard Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), 85-106.

<sup>12</sup> Brevard Childs, *Old Testament in a Canonical Context* (SCM Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Yoder, 100.

<sup>14</sup> In this section I am indebted to the discussion of "Word of God" by Sandra Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 27-59.

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*Lydia Harder is an adjunct professor at Conrad Grebel University College and at Toronto School of Theology.*

# **Anthony Bartlett’s Concept of Abyssal Compassion and the Possibility of a Truly Nonviolent Atonement**

*David Eagle*

## **Introduction**

Many theologians have recently argued that atonement theories related to the Anselmian tradition introduce violent conflict into the very nature of God, which effectively destroys God’s unity—a unity that is self-giving love. Mennonite theology, with its emphasis on a theology of peace, shares similar concerns. J. Denny Weaver takes issue with the dominance of the Anselmian satisfaction theory, particularly because of its inherent violence.<sup>1</sup> In *The Nonviolent Atonement*, he articulates a view that “charts a path of nonviolent atonement through territory strewn with images and assumptions of violence.”<sup>2</sup> He argues for narrative Christus Victor as a superior and inherently nonviolent atonement motif. However, I challenge Weaver’s claim. I contend that Mennonite theologians would find better resources for articulating a nonviolent approach in the work of Anthony Bartlett in his recent book, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*. Below I will raise questions about Weaver’s work and attempt to explain how Bartlett’s paradigm offers a better approach.

I question Weaver’s campaigning for narrative Christus Victor for two reasons. First, much of the historical foundation of his work has been disputed. The justification for championing his view stems from the claim that it belongs to a pre-Constantinian church that had not yet acquiesced to the social order. Hans Boersma objects to Weaver’s assertion that “the theology of Anselm is a theology specific to a church that has separated ethics from salvation and the saving work of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, Boersma points to the roots of the Anselmian tradition in the pre-Nicean tradition.<sup>4</sup> Also, James Reimer has questioned Weaver’s contention that the church post-Nicea acquiesced to the social order and abandoned its distinctive character, and instead claims that classic Trinitarian orthodoxy stands in continuity with the New Testament tradition.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, and more devastatingly, Anthony Bartlett argues that Christus Victor still displays the traces of a divided, and hence violent, God.<sup>6</sup> A summary of Bartlett’s critique will follow below.

Gustav Aulén explains the essence of a Christus Victor approach this way: “Christ fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”<sup>7</sup>

The popularity of Christus Victor arises from the fact that—as opposed to the Anselmian tradition where Jesus is the object of the Father’s wrath (therefore introducing a divide in the Trinity)—evil becomes the object of the wrath of God. Weaver feels that Christus Victor meets the criteria for a nonviolent approach to the atonement that must “underscore that violence originates with humans and not with God.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Weaver goes to considerable lengths to avoid involving God in the origin of violence, his insistence on Christus Victor causes him to advocate an approach where violence does indeed originate with God. For, as Bartlett points out, a careful reading of Aulén’s work reveals that rather than locating the divide between the persons of the Trinity, he locates it between God’s wrath and mercy in God’s inner psyche, thus bringing violent conflict into God’s nature. For Aulén the evil powers are the “executants of God’s judgment on sin”;<sup>9</sup> they were created as an expression of God’s wrath and judgment upon human sin. Thus, in Christus Victor, God’s wrath is overcome by God’s mercy in Christ. As Bartlett explains, “the victory that is won [over God’s wrath] by the divine ‘blessings in Christ’ is altogether God’s own act of victory, for even at this point the dualistic outlook is maintained.”<sup>10</sup>

Christus Victor thus removes Jesus as the object of God’s wrath, but further complicates matters by locating the conflict between divine wrath and divine love in the “internal, ‘psychic’ division of God.”<sup>11</sup> God’s own internal character becomes differentiated and thus marred by the violence of two natures vying for supremacy. Christ’s death has now in effect completed a transaction in the Godhead, where the wrathful “part” is overcome by the merciful “part.” But if God’s own self needs to be overcome, how can God’s essential unity be maintained? Along with Bartlett, I take exception to Weaver’s claim that Christus Victor is inherently nonviolent. Instead, it subtly enshrines violent conflict within God’s own nature, effectively “neutralizing the full human, transformative impact of the cross.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Cross Purposes* Bartlett carefully locates the origin of violence in humanity and preserves God’s unity as love. He provides a superior paradigm

that presents the message of the cross completely pruned of violence, while still upholding a robust notion of God's wrath. His work fits within the approach popularized by René Girard and followed by Raymund Schwager, James Alison, Robert Hamerton-Kelly,<sup>13</sup> and others. Girard's work has been criticized as being overly negative about the foundations of human culture. John Milbank, for instance, says that Girard's "metanarrative...[assumes] every culture is automatically sacrificial and 'bad'" and that "criticism cannot really be used to promote an alternative practice."<sup>14</sup> Weaver, contrasting his approach with Girard's, states that "Narrative Christus Victor has more focus on the entire scope of Jesus' mission to make the reign of God visible, which obviously includes the rejection of violence, but is not limited to it."<sup>15</sup>

Bartlett, aware of Milbank and Weaver's critique, employs a deconstructive approach to temper the all-encompassing and negative tenor of Girard's metanarrative, and is wary of Girard's claim to have found the truth about the origin of human society. Bartlett blends aspects of Girard's thought with a postmodern twist to envision the atonement that completely rejects violence while giving a positive impetus towards alternative practice.

Bartlett departs from both the Anselmian tradition and supporters of Christus Victor with the "moral influence theory" first articulated by Peter Abelard.<sup>16</sup> This theory presents Jesus as a model for humanity to emulate; the way of the cross exerts a "moral influence" on people who encounter its message. The cross challenges us to live a life patterned after the life of Jesus. However, this theory is criticized for lacking "objective" content, and many argue that in moral influence nothing changes with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, beyond merely the presence of a new historical figure to emulate.

The huge problem with Abelard's formulation, as seen from an objectivist or metaphysical standpoint, is that it contains no guarantees, no necessary reasoning that would compel intellectual assent, or at least provide a fixed universe in which atonement can be demonstrated.<sup>17</sup>

However, those arguing for the necessity of an objective grounding to the atonement cannot satisfactorily deal with the division that their own explanations often create, either in the persons of the Trinity or in the Godhead. Bartlett circumvents the criticism of moral influence by proposing a radical re-reading that gives it a non-metaphysical grounding, or if metaphysics must be retained, to do so in a way that avoids "the metaphysics of presence."

**Bartlett and Deconstruction**

Bartlett draws upon the work of Jacques Derrida, often captured by the term “deconstruction,” to provide the foundation (!) on which to build a non-metaphysical, non-transactional view of the atonement.<sup>18</sup> This is difficult, because, while Bartlett needs to counter the claim that atonement must have “objective” ground, he needs enough terra firma on which to argue that the cross has in fact changed the fabric of reality.

Deconstruction aims its entire arsenal at objectivity or “the metaphysics of presence.”<sup>19</sup> The metaphysics of presence believes the present is a static entity that can be accurately described, quantified, objectified, and put on display in a museum case for interested visitors to peruse. Credit is due to Augustine for the invention (or at least the popularization) of this notion.<sup>20</sup> Looking at time, he concluded “that neither future nor past exists.” Instead, “it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come.”<sup>21</sup> The present is all that can exist. The past lives in present memory, the future in present expectation. It follows, then, that the present is a fixed entity. This leads necessarily to the idea that a subject (or self, or text<sup>22</sup>) exists and can be described, because it can be fixed in the present.<sup>23</sup>

Foremost among the problems here is that we cannot accurately describe the present. If I say, “Today is Monday, 10:50 a.m., and I am in the library,” I have tried to describe the present, but the present moment has slipped away—maybe my watch rolls over to 10:51 a.m. The present is inhabited by the ceaseless movement of time, so what is described as present no longer exists. Thus, my attempt to describe it has created a situation that does not quite exist.<sup>24</sup> This simple example shows it is impossible to describe the present, to “stop the flow of time.” Instead, we are left repeating the present, changing it into something different by trying to describe it.

Augustine asserts that only the present exists, and the future and the past are found only in memory. However, the present cannot exist without the past or the future. If neither of those exists, then neither does the present. The present then is liminal<sup>25</sup>—the space we inhabit is always slipping beyond our grasp in the flux between the past and the future, and can never be stopped, nailed down, and perfectly described. Deconstruction argues that the present can only be re-presented<sup>26</sup> in a way that subtly changes what is

being described into something else. This act of re-presentation changes the present into something other than what it is:

What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated [represented] as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it.<sup>27</sup>

Deconstruction has ample reason to destabilize the notion of presence. At the root of upsetting the metaphysics of presence is a concern for the abuse of power. “Deconstruction means to be the delimitation of totalization in all of its forms.”<sup>28</sup>

Proponents argue that whenever the metaphysics of presence steps up, claiming to have the Answer,<sup>29</sup> it ends up looking like Hitler’s Final Solution. Too often, when the present becomes a fixed and static entity, an oppressive totalitarianism is birthed. Instead, deconstruction wants to inhabit a liminal space, and to work at justice today instead of chasing fundamentalist dreams. It wants to blow the love of God wide open instead of “reducing it to a determinate set of beliefs and practices.”<sup>30</sup> Deconstruction is always opening, never closing.

Deconstruction is thus wary of Augustine’s gift of presence to the Western philosophical tradition. His definition of time is undermined by the “trace”<sup>31</sup>—the ceaseless transition from past to future, the presence of the past and future in the present without which the latter could not exist. It recognizes that the present is irrevocably liminal. The trace marks the place where identity and difference, presence and absence, constantly cross. The metaphysics of presence is deconstructed “and loses its protective barrier”; it is “forced to acknowledge the groundless play, the abyss, the absence inhabiting every claim to presence.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, if objectivity is both suspect and impossible to attain, then those who criticize the moral influence theory for lacking objective content have a problem. No explanation of the atonement can be objective, because every attempt to describe what Jesus’ death accomplished is a re-presentation of a past event. Every atonement theory borrows from current perspectives, past history, and future anticipation in trying to explain the significance of the cross. Every theory re-presents and therefore changes the original event. To further complicate matters, to speak of the original event is impossible. Even the

Biblical record re-presents it from the perspectives of various authors. Moral influence may lack objective content, but so does every other effort to define in objective terms the significance of Jesus' death. Proponents of moral influence have the advantage of being honest about their theory's lack of objective content. Opponents who insist that their own particular theories do have objective content enslave the cross to the metaphysics of presence. Instead, the cross is God's descent into our liminal space that disrupts all attempts to fix the present. The incarnation proclaims that God does not inhabit a Platonic heaven but prefers to inhabit the trace, allowing for repetition and re-presentation.

One difficulty in understanding Bartlett's work arises because much of his critique of objectivity lies behind the scenes. But in a rare passage, he speaks of the impact of deconstruction on understanding the atonement:

The meaning of Christ's death that I have presented is found to become directly involved in a very contemporary conversation broached from a very different direction [deconstruction], and the effect is both challenging and exciting.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, for him, deconstruction, with its arsenal aimed at all attempts to fix the present, both anticipates and illuminates the cross, fundamentally a disturbing force in human history.

Bartlett, along with Derrida, is concerned about "the little people" inevitably crushed by hegemonic, unquestioned assumptions about reality. In this sense Bartlett's work shares a close kinship with Jesus' ministry. Jesus, too, was concerned with loosening the stranglehold of tradition (read "presence") and with re-awakening it to the sufferings of the least of human society. As John Caputo aptly puts it:

[D]econstruction helps religion examine its conscience, counseling and chastening religion about its tendency to confuse faith with knowledge, which results in the dangerous and absolutizing triumphalism of religion, which is what spills blood. . . . Religion so instructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, closely hewn to its messianic and prophetic sources and to the God who said the He does not delight in ritual sacrifice but in justice, religion as a powerful prophetic force which has a dream of justice for all God's children—that is the religion that emerges from an hour on the couch with deconstruction.<sup>34</sup>

Bartlett's search for a non-metaphysical explanation of the cross is important because the power of the cross is contained precisely in how it upsets those "seeking to provide a fixed universe in which atonement can be demonstrated."<sup>35</sup> After an hour on the couch with deconstruction, we should realize that the attempt to objectively ground the atonement fundamentally contradicts its message.

### **Abyssal Compassion**

Once Bartlett responds to detractors of the moral influence theory, he articulates a paradigm for the atonement, a modified form of moral influence that he terms "abyssal compassion."<sup>36</sup> I contend that abyssal compassion can do what Weaver failed to do with narrative Christus Victor; that is, provide a nonviolent understanding of the cross, circumvent the necessity for objective content to the atonement, and bring the wrath and love of God into a coherent whole.

The concept of abyssal compassion seeks to encompass two main ideas. "Abyssal" signifies that atonement takes place in the abyss of the human situation—humanity's captivity to selfish desire and retaliatory violence against which God's wrath is revealed. "Compassion" signals that God's reconciliation erupts into our world from the depths of Jesus' self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. This eruption brings the possibility of transformation into the world.

Bartlett's concept fits within the broader atonement tradition. As with most views of the atonement, it seeks to describe how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus both names and redeems the human situation; and it also identifies how Jesus' passion offers humanity new and transformed ways of living.<sup>37</sup> Michael Gorman puts these two components together into biblical terms:

Christ's death ended the reign of certain alien and hostile powers, thereby effecting liberation from them and from this age (Gal 1.4) and inaugurating the new age or new creation. The powers whose reign has ended include especially sin and death (Rom. 6.9-10) but also the old self. . . . Paradoxically, Christ's death brings life; its purpose and effect are not restricted to the forgiveness of sins but include a fundamental renewing and reorienting of life.<sup>38</sup>

So, in a sense, abyssal compassion is nothing new. It stands firmly within the New Testament atonement tradition. But in another sense it is new, as it

seeks to present an understanding that is nonviolent and non-metaphysical, while retaining the Biblical notion of God's wrath and allowing the cross to bring new possibilities into the world. Bartlett effectively walks a very fine line here. He seeks to respond to his own critique of Anselm and Christus Victor, Milbank, Weaver's critique of Girard, and the common complaint that the moral influence theory lacks objective content.

A starting place for more fully understanding Bartlett is to explain what he means by the "abyss." Luke's Gospel records the story of Simeon, who immediately upon seeing the newborn Jesus and proclaiming him as the advent of God's redemptive action in the world, speaks these words to Mary:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:34, 35)

The moment of joy at the Messiah's birth is also filled with the stark revelation that the world is a violent place. Jesus' way of life, modeled by self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love, reveals a world fundamentally opposed to it and filled with violence and hatred. The crucifixion—the sword through Mary's soul—is prefigured in Simeon's dark speech, and Mary must have wondered what anguish this baby boy would bring. The crucifixion is emblematic of the human situation—that even while yearning for redemption from suffering, oppression, and death, humanity cannot resist violence as a means to redemption. Even when God enters our world and models a restored and redeemed way of living in the life of Jesus Christ, he is violently destroyed. Humans are wrapped up in the selfish desire to violently differentiate themselves from the other. Selfish desire inevitably turns to violence (whether physical, emotional, suicidal, or addictive). This claim warrants an example taken from the Western context.

Consumer capitalism, the basic economic structure of the West, uses desire and competition as basic principles. People work to make money to buy things that other people work to make in order to make money and buy things. The entire consumerist machine strives to make us want more, all under a promise of fulfillment and happiness. "The consumer culture does awaken suffering—the suffering of our yearning, our self-contempt, our envy—but only

in order to promise that its nostrums will put our sufferings back to sleep.”<sup>39</sup> But our sufferings do not sleep; they only create more desire. This cycle of selfish desire—whether for me, my family, or my country—ultimately leads to all sorts of violence, both physical and emotional, personal and corporate, creating a long litany of violent acts. We rape the earth in search of natural resources; we fight wars to protect our access to these resources; we commodify relationships, leaving broken families and abandoned children. We work countless hours and end up killing our souls. We numb the pain of our suffering with a wide array of addictions that in turn create cycles of abuse and death. On this point the Girardian critique stands.

While Girard’s theories may not explain the origin and foundation of human society, Bartlett believes they do reveal the endless cycle of desire and violence in which our world is trapped. He describes this cycle as the abyss. And from it the cross speaks; the cross is the voice of God that reveals the abyss. This voice is first and always an affirmative word, for even in the abyss God invites humanity into relationship.<sup>40</sup> The voice of God also speaks words of condemnation. Here Bartlett develops his provocative ideas about God’s wrath.

For him, Jesus on the cross reveals the impossibility of humans redeeming themselves from the abyss. Humanity is in such a mess that it kills God, the very expression of self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. The human race murders compassion and love, and places itself beyond its own redemptive power. The cross speaks an emphatic “No” against humanity’s propensity towards selfish desire and retaliatory violence as a solution to conflict. The cross holds up an unforgiving mirror to humanity and reveals its rebellion and depravity. Deeper than that, the cross brings God’s wrath upon humanity. Paul’s oft-quoted words, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18), are relevant as long as the wickedness and godlessness of humanity is defined in a particular way. Bartlett quotes Robert Hamerton-Kelly about the precise object of God’s wrath, defined as:

the divine non-resistance to human evil. It is God’s unwillingness to intervene in the process of action and consequence in the human world by which we set up and operate the system of sacred violence, and so paradoxically a sign of love as the refusal to

abridge our freedom and a respect for our choices even when they are catastrophic. . . . The Cross reveals this paradoxical wrath as God's acceptance for our free choice to destroy ourselves and each other, inasmuch as it is the supreme instance of this human resistance against the good.<sup>41</sup>

God's wrath is not a hatred of ontological stain that mars humanity, nor is it represented by evil. Rather, it is the divine decision not to intervene in the cycle of desire and violence even when that cycle winds up crucifying God. The "No" of God's wrath brings destruction as the consequence of humanity's choice to resist the good. As Jesus hangs dead on the cross, humanity is forced to deal with the full weight of that "No"—"God is dead. And we have killed him."<sup>42</sup> Humanity has denied and rejected its only hope for redemption. Here are the darkest recesses of the abyss.

However, this "No to humanity" is uttered within a larger "Yes," to echo a Barthian theme. The cross is first and foremost an affirmative word, and Bartlett is keen to develop a view of the atonement that is first and foremost positive: "It is in this context that the death of Christ needs urgently to be revisited, developing an understanding of salvation 'in the abyss'."<sup>43</sup> For as Good Friday reveals the profound dis-redemption of humanity, we also see in it that the word of the God-man on the cross is a loving invitation from God to relationship. The abyss, to Bartlett, is not only a negative image, and contra Girard, the cross does more than simply reveal the abyss. Rather,

This is the immense novelty [of the gospel]: the eruption of a moment of love from the deepest, darkest place of human abandonment, including the ultimate point of death that somehow does not/cannot extinguish it.<sup>44</sup>

Here the cross issues a deconstructive word in the abandonment of the abyss that brings about redemption in it. The affirmative and eruptive word of the cross gives birth to the hope and power that humanity can be carried out of its captivity to selfishness and violence into a new transformed future governed by non-retaliatory love and self-giving compassion. "Only a free, unfounded act of compassion may evoke a genuine human transformation."<sup>45</sup> The cross creates the possibility that a human life marked by selfishness and violence might find a pattern to imitate and be transformed into one patterned by

compassion, love, forgiveness, and non-retaliation. As James Dunn says, “Jesus’ death was [the beginning of] the end of humankind under the power of sin and death [read: selfish desire and violence], the destruction of man and woman as sinner.”<sup>46</sup> But the end of this power paradoxically takes place in the presence with us of the God who, on the cross, feels the absence of God. And even as God reveals through the cross the abyss of humanity’s existence, we find in the abyss “the freedom to love.”<sup>47</sup>

[T]he Christ of the Gospels fully and explicitly exposes the abyss, abandons himself in it in order both to reveal and to redeem it. From this flow the progressive deconstruction of all sacred and metaphysical order, proposing in its stead a terrifying freedom of abyssal love. The cross is both the source and the pathway of this love. It is the fulcrum of the human universe to change it into something we can hardly imagine, and yet do dimly intuit, an abyss of love.<sup>48</sup>

The word of the cross is more than one of death and suffering. The resurrection plays a key role in injecting the cross with hope and providing impetus for positive social change:

Without diminishing the significance of the cross, we can say that for Paul it was a prologue or a prelude to resurrection and exaltation, as long as we understand this prelude to be essential and definitive rather than merely introductory. Without the resurrection and exaltation, this cross is only human weakness and folly.<sup>49</sup>

Bartlett has a novel approach to connecting Jesus’ death and resurrection. He draws heavily from Kierkegaard’s notion of repetition and develops the significance of the resurrection for an understanding of atonement:

There is repetition in the life of the Crucified. Somehow the nonretaliatory victim is found to live again, and to live again in terms of nonretaliation. Like Job his life is given back double and more. However, this return to life is not at the cost of masking original violence; on the contrary, it is doubly disclosed, first in facticity and second, and primordially, by its undoing in compassion. The gospel name for this is resurrection. There is no getting to the bottom of resurrection; but that is the whole point! Resurrection

is the eternal or bottomless affirmation of nonretaliation, or forgiveness, for all violence. . . . Resurrection is not a transcendent miracle vindicating Christ against human history; rather it arises in and from that history. . . . There is no limit to Christ's forgiveness, his gift of himself in the darkness of human violence and abandonment. And the very quality of this "no limit" resists, subverts, overturns the hitherto irresistible damnation of death. Where before a death inevitably ends in the rictus of the corpse, the song of violence triumphant, in the cross, the event of the Crucified, it is changed endlessly into a glimpse of compassion and life begun over.<sup>50</sup>

For Bartlett, death and sin go hand in hand. Sin—defined as selfish desire and retaliatory violence—is stopping the flux, nailing down the present, and closing the door to self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. Death is the ultimate price of sin, for in death all hope for the future is destroyed. Prior to the resurrection, humanity's enslavement to selfish desire and violence inevitably ended in death. However, the cross and resurrection introduce a Derridean trace of love in death, and open up a liminal space in the midst of human history. They provide the memory of a new past/future inhabiting the sin-infected, static present—the past of a crucified Jesus and the future of a resurrected Jesus. They disrupt fixed reality—a world dominated by death—and open up the world to the free flow of compassion.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Bartlett's concept of abyssal compassion can be summarized this way. In Jesus, God fully enters into our world. Through him we see a picture of a God governed by self-giving compassion and non-retaliatory love. The world cannot tolerate God as revealed in Jesus' life because it is enslaved to sin. God's wrath is revealed against sin in the unwillingness to put a stop to human violence, thus abandoning humanity to destruction. This is the abyss in which we are trapped. Through Jesus, God issues a direct challenge to the human propensity towards selfish desire and violence. Humanity kills God, because it cannot resist resorting to violence to deal with conflict. God submits and refuses to take revenge, instead uttering words of compassion and forgiveness. By suffering and dying on the cross for and with humanity, Jesus begins to

open a way through the abyss through “the point of crisis to which we are inevitably pushed.”<sup>52</sup>

God both subverts humanity’s irresistible tendency towards selfishness and violence in resurrection and destroys death’s stranglehold over the world. The experience of the condemning and liberating word of the cross introduces the possibility for change. It opens up the chance for humans once captive to selfishness and violence to begin a new life patterned by the cross. By demonstrating the possibility of transformation, others too will be confronted by it. Some will embrace a life of non-retaliatory love and self-giving compassion. By embracing a new way of living and embodying transformed behavior and newness of life, people will give witness to this new, alternate reality now at work in the world.

Bartlett’s view deserves serious attention as a cogent explanation of the saving significance of the cross in nonviolent terms. His attempt is superior to Weaver’s because he avoids resorting to speculative arguments about pre- and post-Constantinian theology and because he distances himself from *Christus Victor* terminology that introduces violent conflict into God’s very nature. Bartlett’s approach also takes seriously Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence, and offers a view of the significance of the cross that is rooted in the postmodern context. Mennonite theologians would do well to grapple with the concept of abyssal compassion as a truly nonviolent atonement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> A. James Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology,” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Weaver says his understanding of *Christus Victor* differs in important ways from that of Gustav Aulén; thus he appends the word *narrative*. Does Bartlett’s critique then still apply? It would appear that Weaver has *added to* Aulén’s presentation, rather than modifying it. Thus, Bartlett’s critique stands.

<sup>7</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 111. For the Church Fathers the powers are sin, death, and the devil, to which Luther adds the law and God's wrath. See Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 114.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996); Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence, Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," in *A Scholastic Miscellany. Library of Christian Classics* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Westminster Press, 1956).

<sup>17</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) is the best compact introduction to Derrida's thought as it relates to religion.

<sup>19</sup> Metaphysics of Presence: In a linguistic sense, it "simply means the delusion that words are objects and that they have stable meaning, instead of the absence and indeterminacy recognized by deconstruction" (Robert J. Belton, *Words of Art* [Online] (1996 [cited 21 December 2001]); available from <http://www.arts.ouc.bc.ca/fina/glossary/>. This definition can be expanded to include not only words but systems, beliefs, institutions, ideas, practices, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Presence: "The fact or condition of being present – i.e., of being at hand or before one, of actually existing. In postmodern contexts, presence is caught up in the discussion of determinacy in the sense that there must be something lurking behind a sign in order to guarantee that it will signify. In that sense, a determinist would believe in some sort of presence (if only metaphorically). In contrast, deconstruction would argue that there is no such metaphysical guarantee" (*Ibid.*).

<sup>21</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 235.

<sup>22</sup> Text: "[I]n postmodernist contexts a 'text' is indeterminate, open-ended, and endlessly subject to reinterpretation as audiences change. As such, 'text' can refer to any expression, consciously artistic or otherwise, which can be read, whether it is written or visual. Even social formations can be seen as a text open to interpretation" (Belton, *Words of Art*).

<sup>23</sup> In this line of thinking, God, being the Ultimate Subject, exists absolutely, is pure presence. If God was not pure presence, then God could slip into the past and a part of God would cease to exist. This notion has led to a static picture of God. God is immutable, changeless, and predictable.

<sup>24</sup> This is essentially Kierkegaard's idea of repetition. By repeating something, we subtly alter its characteristics, turning it into something that no longer accurately or completely describes it.

Kierkegaard explores this concept in narrative form in *Repetition, An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

<sup>25</sup> Liminal: “[T]he processes that go on within people when they are separated from their stable worlds and core values, then placed in an in-between world” (Alan Roxburgh and Mike Regele, *Crossing the Bridge: Church Leadership in a Time of Change* (Costa Mesa: Percept Group, Inc., 2000), 64.

<sup>26</sup> The hyphenation in “re-presented” tries to capture the sense that when describing reality we are attempting to nail down the present. However, it keeps slipping away and we are left forever re-presenting the past.

<sup>27</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern a/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 48.

<sup>28</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 126.

<sup>29</sup> Anyone who claims to have the Answer claims to have a corner on the truth and to be the authoritative interpreter of reality.

<sup>30</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, in *Thinking in Action*, ed. Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2001), 108.

<sup>31</sup> Trace: The connection of past and future elements to things present. The trace is the part of the past and future that inhabits the present, without which the present would cease to exist. The trace is absent from the present; instead it is merely suggested. It undermines our attempts to pin down the present. The trace is the constant movement from past to present to future, without which time would have no meaning. For instance, the sweatshirt I’m wearing is inhabited by the trace of such things as “cotton fields” and “the garment industry.” These two elements are not present in it, but without them it would not exist. Similarly, as I write this article it is inhabited by the future trace of “being defended” or “published in a journal.” Without this future trace, the notion of this article would have no meaning (Belton, *Words of Art*).

<sup>32</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35.

<sup>33</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 159-60.

<sup>35</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Bartlett explicitly identifies *abyssal compassion* as his understanding of atonement.

<sup>37</sup> Bartlett provides a parallel description. “The most proper human possibility of impossibility is transformed by compassion into an-archic, eschatological possibility” (*Cross Purposes*, 249). Atonement is how human impossibility is transformed into possibility by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

<sup>38</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 86.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Frank, *Untitled Manuscript* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2000), 156-57.

<sup>40</sup> See Luke 23:39-43.

<sup>41</sup> Hamerton-Kelly as quoted in Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 206, footnote 53.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” (Section 125), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1954).

<sup>43</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>46</sup> James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 223.

<sup>47</sup> Frank, *Untitled Manuscript*, 162.

<sup>48</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 153-54.

<sup>51</sup> “Only a God ‘weak in power but strong in love’ can be strong enough to take on all the world’s pain and die on a cross. Trust in such a God can give human beings the strength to risk following on the path of compassion and vulnerability, to think what it means to live lives whose first priority is love. In a broken and complex world we Christians may sometimes find ourselves driven to force and even violence in spite of our best intentions, but we need to acknowledge that to choose such alternatives is always to admit a failure of imagination, a concession to weakness, always to have betrayed the image of the power of love we have encountered in the powerless Jesus on the cross.” William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 21.

<sup>52</sup> Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 223.

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*David Eagle is lead pastor of Saanich Community Church in Victoria, BC.*

# Reading the Anabaptists: Anabaptist Historiography and Luther Blissett's *Q*

*Jeremy Garber*

## **Introduction**

One of the most fruitful directions of recent theology focuses on the connection of narrative, virtue, and character formation. In this regard, the theological world is beginning to take notice of Anabaptism. Scholars such as Stanley Hauerwas and James McClendon, and popular theologians like Brian McLaren and Anthony Campolo, have cited Anabaptist ideals like ethics, community, and biblicism as positive new directions for the twenty-first century church. Yet a careful look at past appropriations of the Anabaptist story reveals that its appeal is more narrative than ideological. The grand testimonies of pacifist martyrs can be transplanted into any already existing ideologies, and in fact have been. An examination of three recent interpretations of Anabaptist history—those of H.S. Bender, twentieth-century Marxist historians, and a recent techno-anarchist Italian novel—reveal that Anabaptism's spread may have more to do with the drama of its story rather than the purity of its ideals.

Academics often argue that ideas make their way carefully into the public consciousness via papers, conferences, and lecture series, in a rational and orderly way. This may be partially true. The spread of Marxism, however, probably had more to do with rousing speeches on the soapbox than *Das Kapital* as required classroom reading. In other words, our thinking comes after our images and experiences of life. Ideas travel crouched on the back of character and plot, because otherwise most people's brains cannot retain them.

The magnetic draw of sixteenth-century Anabaptism emanates from the drama of its inception. Anabaptism's beliefs cannot be separated from its story. Its theological emphases of discipleship, community, and pneumatological biblicism are inextricably linked to the stories of resolute martyrs dying in flame with their tongues cut out. The *Martyrs Mirror* collected hundreds of pages of eight-point-type death monologues and added some etchings to heighten the pathos. This pastiche of grisly narratives symbolized Anabaptist mythology for so many years that it was traditionally given as a Mennonite wedding gift. The *Martyrs Mirror* wedded the simplistic beliefs of a Christ-

centered nonresistant faith to vignettes of a faithful people bravely standing against overwhelming odds. The early Anabaptists were iconoclasts, rebels, lone gunmen at high noon with Bibles in their mental holsters. It was not the Anabaptists' systematic formulations but the drama of their lives that enabled their church to blossom and survive.

After these initial dramas had faded, however, theology overruled story in the interests of institutional survival. Menno Simons and other Anabaptist leaders turned drama into doctrine. In recent history, H. S. Bender, the "dean of Mennonite scholarship," rejected the Anabaptist stories with the most violence, the most blood, and the most pathos and tragedy. Bender's influential essay "The Anabaptist Vision"<sup>1</sup> specifically excludes apocalyptic revolutionary groups as belonging a priori outside the Anabaptist fold. Bender concluded that scholars "know enough to draw a clear line of demarcation between original evangelical and constructive Anabaptism on the one hand . . . and the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, or even antinomian related and unrelated groups on the other hand."<sup>2</sup> Of course, scholars did not yet know enough, but Bender pointedly urged them in that direction. His attempt to steer the church between what he perceived as vapid liberalism and violent fundamentalism required a definitive history that definitively rejected violence back to its very origins. To Bender's credit, his vision sustained the Mennonite church through the fundamentalist/modernist debates, lasting well into the 1960s.

The contrast between Bender's chosen story and that of secular German historians shows that one group's ideological trash can be another group's narrative treasure. Marxists saw in the early Anabaptists the seeds of the original proletariat revolution. Friedrich Engels cited the Anabaptists as proto-Marxists even before the ideology of Marxism had fully coalesced. Marxist historians of the German Democratic Republic claimed the German Peasants War as their direct ancestor, concentrating on Anabaptism as the original revolutionary force and dismissing pacifist Anabaptism as the degenerate leftover of the commoners' attempt to nip capitalism in the bud. Even non-Marxist social historians were forced to acknowledge the multiple societal forces that birthed the stepchildren of Radical Reformation. Marxists provided a new narrative/interpretive framework to read Anabaptist theology. The sixteenth-century Anabaptists served the mythological interests of a movement fundamentally opposed to religion in all its manifestations.

Literature, however, was never regarded as one of Marxism's strongest suits. The grim attempt to unilaterally root Marxist thought in Hegelian dialectical materialism left little room for fanciful expression. The collapse of the Soviet Union called into question Marxism's metanarrative pretensions, leaving room for a new story in which could be read the early Anabaptists. This surprising interpretation recently presented itself as a novel written by four Italian anarchists using the name of former soccer star Luther Blissett.<sup>3</sup> Their novel *Q*<sup>4</sup> implicitly linked the most radical of the radical reformers with postmodern anarchists, the store-window-bashing, computer-virus-writing faceless guerillas of today. With markedly divergent results, the authors of *Q* utilize the same selective historiography as Bender and the GDR materialists. Just as Bender connected his Anabaptist theology to selective modernist pacifism, and East German historians to Marxist socioeconomic theory, *Q*'s unique narrative connects the theology of Müntzer and Münster to the weblogs, Black Bloc anarchists, and rogue computer hackers of the twenty-first century.

### **The Plot of *Q* and the Radical Reformation**

*Q* concerns an unnamed protagonist who finds himself swept up in the more dramatic fringes of the Radical Revolution of the sixteenth century. The protagonist, also the first-person narrator, accompanies major historical figures throughout the shifting plot. The novel is set up in three parts. Part One, *The Coiner*, recounts the drama of the battle of Frankenhausen, Thuringia and the protagonist's involvement with Thomas Müntzer. Part Two, *One God, One Faith, One Baptism*, moves through the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement toward the apocalyptic capture of the city of Munster. Finally, Part Three, *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*, shifts away from traditional European Anabaptist history to examine the Radical Revolution in Venice and southern Italy.

As the protagonist fights his way through the decadent underside of the Radical Reformation, his name changes to protect his identity and that of his companions. The protagonist's pseudonymous subterfuge highlights the narrator's Everyman quality, and also hints at the authors' view of the fluid nature of postmodern existence. The narrator comments in the opening *in medias res* section, "I automatically turn around when people call me Gustav, I've become accustomed to a name no less strange to me than any other."<sup>5</sup>

The date and location of the protagonist's action also change rapidly and frequently, always indicated by headings at the beginning of the book's 117 short chapters. This leapfrogging of character, time, and setting mirrors the fluid identities of *Q*'s multiple authors, who reject the linear conceptions of reality typified by the East German historians' dialectical approach.

*Q* opens with an appropriately fragmented film-like account of the battle of Frankenhausen on 15 May 1525. The protagonist personally accompanies Thomas Müntzer, "the Coiner," an apocalyptic Spiritualist who eventually joined the peasants of Thuringia in their unsuccessful rebellion against their oppressive landowner. The Anabaptists are being pursued by a secret agent of the Roman Catholic Church nicknamed *Q* (after Qoelet, the author of Ecclesiastes); this nemesis provides the title of the novel. After this impressionistic beginning, the action shifts to Wittenberg in 1519, where the protagonist witnesses the debates between Martin Luther and his mentor and foe, Andreas Karlstadt. Rather than choose between them, he gravitates to the brash charisma of the young preacher Thomas Müntzer—"his voice: the flame that set Germany ablaze"<sup>6</sup>—and inserts himself as one of Müntzer's lieutenants. The protagonist's education and literacy aid in Müntzer's integral role in the rebellion of the surrounding peasants (he watches the conflict-leery Hans Denck flee the battle of Frankenhausen before the fighting begins). Part One ends in the protagonist's crazed, profane monologue against the disciplined resolve of the princes' troops. This splintered use of language recalls the truncated sentences and dismembered corpses that began the novel's portrayal of the horror of revolutionary war.

Part Two chronicles the protagonist's flight to the Martyrs' Synod in 1527 and his transferal of identity to Lienhard Jost—the sole incidence of the protagonist's assumption of a historical personality. Melchior Hoffmann and Jan Trijpmaker appear in succession, but the protagonist feels that reformation requires something more than Hoffmann's apocalypticism. After picking a rusted sword off the ground, he confesses, "I felt a strange shiver as I clutched a weapon once again and I understood that the moment had come to try something magnificent."<sup>7</sup> The protagonist saves the life of Jan Matthys, the eventual leader of the mad apocalyptic city-state of Münster, and finds his ticket to the "magnificent" life of the sword. The impatient protagonist finds Matthys' revolutionary rhetoric seductive: "He wanted to fight this battle, he

wanted to fight it with a passion, he was just waiting for a sign from God to declare war on the wicked and the servants of iniquity.”<sup>8</sup> Both the protagonist and Matthys have little inkling of the true nature of the following war on iniquity.

Blissett portrays Münster as a medieval carnival turned Waco, Texas. The section of *Q* that details the fall of the city bears the subtitle “The Word made flesh.” The initial days of Matthys’ success are filled with wine, women, and song, but Bernhard Rothmann’s apocalyptic preaching soon shifts the party to a fascist rally. Matthys declares, “The kingdom of God is a jewel that you can win only if you get your hands dirty with shit, mud and blood.”<sup>9</sup> Arriving back in Münster during the book burning on 16 March 1534 (a historically recorded event), the protagonist sees on the burning pile “a copy of Erasmus, showing that this God no longer needs our language and will not give us peace.”<sup>10</sup> The “holy pimp” Jan Bockelson takes over the new “kingship of David,” the city falls, and the nameless protagonist is forced to change his name once more.

The third section of the novel shifts its attention to Italy and away from sixteenth-century Anabaptism proper.<sup>11</sup> Part Three focuses on a subversive plot to distribute an anonymous Catholic apologetic for justification by faith titled “The Benefit of Christ Crucified.” The protagonist realizes his ancient enemy Q is still haunting him, and poses as an Anabaptist named Titian to lure the double agent out into the open; Q is symbolically buried under the collapsing nave of a Gothic cathedral. The printing cabal of humanists and Jewish merchants is exposed, Q’s benefactor Gianpetro Carafa is elected Pope Paul IV, and the protagonist escapes Western culture altogether, heading for the Muslim Middle East to become one of the first successful exporters of coffee. The revolutionary German has become a medieval international proto-Starbucks capitalist.

### ***Q* and Anabaptist Historiography**

Although not identical, Blissett’s interpretation of Anabaptist history exhibits fraternal similarities to the Marxist reading of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers. At the heart of the Marxist interpretation of history lies the struggle between the actual laborers and the capitalist overseers who make money off their labor without actually laboring themselves. Based on the Hegelian

dialectic, Marxism predicts the workers rising up and claiming their fair share of the capital produced by their labor, moving into a restored “Golden Age” of equitable distribution—the famed “From each according to their ability to each according to their need.” History is therefore read through the lens of the struggle between labor and capital, production and exploitation—“dialectical materialism.” Ideology—including theology—serves only as veiled exploitation of those who rightfully create the necessities of society, the justification of keeping the oppressed productive class in its exploited social niche.

Friedrich Engels, one of the fathers of Marxism, mentioned the Anabaptists in his research on the German Peasants War. He searched German history for examples of the upsurge of the proletariat (productive) class and found its original prototype in the Peasants War of 1525. Engels saw that war as the initial impulse of the productive class to oppose burgeoning capitalism before it began, a protest against the emerging bourgeois subculture to which both nobles and peasants were indebted. In typical Marxist fashion, the theology attached to these uprisings was merely a veneer over the interests of material production:

In the so-called religious wars of the Sixteenth Century, very positive material class-interests were at play, and those wars were class wars just as were the later collisions in England and France. If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation, and is to be explained by the conditions of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Engels’s lens of dialectical materialism did not allow him to regard theological interests as a fundamental part of the peasants’ revolution. The rhetoric of biblicism and anticlericalism was merely a convenient way for the peasants to express their material frustrations.

Later German historians in the Marxist German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed Engels’s materialist line. In fact, some tension existed between church historians, who viewed theology as the primary causative factor in the Radical Reformation, and Marxist historians, who saw the class struggle as underlying theological rhetoric. Paul Peachey observed that both sides utilized an a priori conception of reality that necessarily influenced their interpretation

of radical reform. In other words, the Marxists had ideological assumptions which subjectively colored their research as much as the church historians:

Intruding into the [Marxist] empirical formula is a non-empirical postulate, 'dialectic materialism,' which, however, is accorded empirical status within the scheme . . . . What to the non-Marxist is thus a metaphysical postulate, parading as an empirical construct in the historian's arsenal, is to the Marxist historian the most scientific of all laws.<sup>13</sup>

Abraham Friesen points out that Engels's concentration on the admittedly biased historical data of Wilhelm Zimmerman led to characterizing the Zwickau Prophets and Thomas Müntzer as the true fathers of Anabaptism.<sup>14</sup> The belief in the class struggle of production as the most fundamental fact of history obscured Marxist historians to the influential power of ideas and theological beliefs.

The GDR historians' essays in volume IX of the Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies series, *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation*,<sup>15</sup> provide some concrete examples of the Marxist emphasis on dialectical materialism. One of the first and most shocking is Adolf Laube's concentration on "the willingness to use force as a decisive criterion of radicality."<sup>16</sup> When the clashes of history are driven by the proletariats' desire for physical justice, the Marxist historian necessarily excludes pacifism as a second-rate cop-out toward the bourgeois class. Laube sees Müntzer as a prototypical example of Anabaptist proletariat revolution at its finest; Müntzer's leadership in the Peasants War "acted as catalyst for the formation and radical development of this theology for appealing to ordinary people, as it activated the people as the carrier of the force of the sword and the driving power of revolutionary change."<sup>17</sup> Günter Vogler saw the violent apocalypticism of Münster as the only way the proletariats could break out of their ideological oppression, the "radicalization of the radicals."<sup>18</sup> A concentration on forceful uprising against the middle and upper classes led Marxist historians to concentrate on the violent, apocalyptic strains of Anabaptism as the truest strains of radicalism, leaving the pacifist, ecclesiological Anabaptists as footnotes to the continuation of the bourgeois state.<sup>19</sup>

The anarchists Blissett share the Marxist affinity for the material basis of the Radical Reformation. Influential figures who rejected the sword, such

as Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, and Menno Simons, are notably absent in the action of *Q*. The Hutterians make an appearance, only to have their sectarianism rejected: “Being pure doesn’t mean cutting yourself off from the world, condemning it, in order blindly to obey the law of God; if you want to change the world of men you’ve got to live in it.”<sup>20</sup> The protagonist explicitly rejects Melchior Hofmann’s emphasis on pacifism as unhelpful to the radical reformers’ cause: “Trijpmaker continued to preach meekness, witness, passive martyrdom as Hoffman had directed him to. I knew it couldn’t last. . . . As far as Hoffmann was concerned, we should have been a herd of meek preachers, skilled and not too noisy, lining up to be butchered one after the other in the name of the Supreme One.”<sup>21</sup> Hans Denck says of the protagonist’s opportunist survivability, “You must have a guardian angel, my friend,” to which the latter replies, “These days you’d be better off with a decent sword.”<sup>22</sup> Most pointedly, the protagonist rejects any conception of a transcendent God or spiritual reality as part of the Reformation project. “Frankenhausen had taught me not to wait for a host of angels: no God would descend to help the wretched. They would have to help themselves.”<sup>23</sup> In keeping with a materialist concentration on physical rebellion and action over word, *Q*’s protagonist travels only with the rebellious and the militant, not with the nonresistant or the meek, his sword strapped to his side and ready for action against the upper classes.

Blissett also paints the larger picture of the political undercurrents of reformation, both magisterial and radical. The letters of *Q* to his patron, Archbishop Gianpietro Carafa (later Paul IV), reveal the Roman Catholic Church’s supposed political machinations. The Church attempts to suppress the Reformation solely to maintain its physical, political, and military power. *Q* schemes behind the scenes to counter the power of Emperor Charles V, the German noble princes rebelling against the church, and particularly the Anabaptists as a symbol of the military power of the lower classes:

The past few weeks have seen this city shaken by the suppression of the so-called Anabaptists. These blasphemers take to their extremes the perfidious doctrines of Luther . . . in this they are worse than Luther—they also refuse to obey the secular authorities and claim that they are the only Christian community to accomplish civic administration. They wish to subvert the world from head to toe.<sup>24</sup>

Q nurtures Müntzer's popular ascension to weaken Luther's power against the church<sup>25</sup> but encourages Müntzer to fight the battle of Frankenhausen when he in turn becomes too dangerous.<sup>26</sup> Q also sneaks into Münster as the historical betrayer of the city, Heinrich Gresbeck, to feed Bernhard Rothmann's apocalypticism so that Q can reveal the city's weaknesses to the invading Catholic army. Q's Machiavellian intrigues are couched in theological terms, but clearly his interests and those of his master are fundamentally military and political.

The novel also addresses the Radical Reformation's economic roots. Müntzer's original appeal to the protagonist results from his preaching against "everyone who claims to want to bring the food of the soul to the people while leaving their bellies empty."<sup>27</sup> Müntzer rejects the Lutheran church-states because "the purpose of the German rulers is clearly apparent. It is not faith that fills their hearts and guides their actions, but their greed for gain."<sup>28</sup> In the person of Lienhard Jost, the protagonist rebels against the luxury of middle-class theologians "talking and talking, presenting themselves as great thinkers of the Christian faith. ... It was wealth that guaranteed the fame of Strasbourg. It was that fame that brought writers and students flooding to the city."<sup>29</sup> He bluntly characterizes the background of the rebellion of Münster as "lucre, the accursed lucre of the Dutch traders."<sup>30</sup> Part Three depicts a subtle prolonged rebellion against the pre-eminent bankers of Western Europe, the Fuggers, using forged letters of credit in order to destroy the credibility of capitalism and undermine the financial backing of the Catholic Church. "Money is the real symbol of the beast," says Q's co-conspirator Ludwig Schaliendecker, and the authors implicitly agree.

However, Part Three points to one important difference between Marxist historiography and the historiography of the Messrs. Blissett. Rather than seeing ideology as a veil for material interests, the authors of *Q* see it as a powerful weapon in its own right. A letter to Müntzer outlines Frederick's fear of the printing press at the latter's disposal, "and that your words might reach the hearths of revolt that are gradually being lit throughout his territory and beyond."<sup>31</sup> The protagonist sees the press as the most powerful weapon in the revolutionaries' arsenal, "rapid glances and agile fingers composing the Magister's writings: projectiles fired in all directions by the most powerful of cannons."<sup>32</sup> He himself invents the very notion of fliers—Flugblätter—to

distribute to the peasants the revolutionary notions that will drive them to armed rebellion.<sup>33</sup> The intent of the publication cabal of “The Benefit of Christ Crucified” is to liberate the people from the oppressive political power of the Catholic Church by the book’s theological support of justification through faith by a Roman Catholic author. Rejecting the Marxists’ modernist notions of the objective basis of history, the metanarrative of dialectical materialism, the anarchist authors of *Q* see the postmodern value of ideas distributed without regulation as the keystone of rebellion against the political and economic power of the state.<sup>34</sup>

### **Marx, Bender, or *Q*?**

The polygenesis stream of Anabaptist historians has generally refuted H. S. Bender’s characterization of the true heritage of the Radical Reformation as “evangelical and constructive Anabaptism.” These historians point to multiple streams of ideologies and causative factors in the early Radical Reformation rather than to Bender’s concentration on Swiss-German Anabaptism.<sup>35</sup> Even a firmly committed Marxist like Laube admits that “Marxist historians now recognize that theology and belief did not simply reflect social issues within the conflicts of the Reformation, but had their own relative importance.”<sup>36</sup> Paul Peachey, while admitting his use of the “positivist” model of scientific inquiry in his study of Anabaptist history, nonetheless “recognizes that while the positivist model is valid and indispensable within its own limits, it does not eliminate or itself escape the metaphysical problem which in the end confronts every effort to investigate human behavior.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly, modernist concentrations on either theology or materialism as the bedrock of historical inquiry have not yielded adequate fruit. Contemporary critical perspectives suggest that a reading of Anabaptist history must concentrate on more than static abstract patterns of ideology.

Blissett’s novel provides an alternate way to understand the essence of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, and by extension to suggest a missionary strategy for the twenty-first century Anabaptist church. The Luther Blissett project, and the Wu Mings after it, accurately taps into our contemporary zeitgeist; ideologies are more effectively communicated by amorphous, dynamic narratives than by linear and static creeds. In their very rejection of separate authorial identities, says reviewer Franco Berardi, “Luther Blissett’s

dis-identity is awareness of the language's becoming, mutation of roles, becoming community, bodies meeting up with one another, desertion and going adrift."<sup>38</sup> *Q*'s unnamed protagonist distributing fliers to the peasants of sixteenth-century Europe also celebrates the precarious position of language and truth in our contemporary context:

The ground stalked by all these precariously named characters is that of the frenzy and madness produced by an historical change in the infosphere, the invention and spreading of a new information technology, that is the press, the possibility of reproducing texts.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Blissett uses the violent birth pangs of the modernist paradigm shift in the Radical Reformation to point out a similar radical shift in the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century Western world. As the Anabaptists used the newly printed word to mobilize the oppressed of their day, so postmodern radicals use the shifting "infosphere" of the Internet, text messaging, and freely distributed intellectual property to undermine the hegemony of the capitalist superpowers with their radio, television, and outdated notions of copyrights.

As mentioned in the opening of this article, many theologians and church leaders are looking at the genesis of Anabaptism to see if its novel approach to the Christian way of life can inform the theological malaise of our postmodern era. Yet in examining past interpretations of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, it seems clear that the Anabaptist story can be molded to fit whichever ideological biases the reader brings to the text. Is there such a thing as "the" Anabaptist history? Is there such a thing as "pure history" at all? This small study suggests that our quest for objective knowledge is more difficult than we would like.

However, acknowledging our cultural biases and the existence of multiple interpretations of history need not deter theologians and historians from attempting to re-read the Anabaptist story with fresh eyes. Theology and church history, in both their best senses, exist as second-order tools that help the Christian church focus its primary activities of worship, mission, and discipleship. Both readers new to Anabaptism and those who consider themselves the Anabaptists' spiritual descendants can combine the interpretations of the past to appropriate the Anabaptist story in ways that will encourage the church's faithfulness today. The dramatic narrative of Anabaptism can combine Bender's emphasis on pacifism and discipleship,

the Marxists' acknowledgment of economic and political realities, and the Blissett's use of the power of information. The value of narrative, as illustrated by *Q*, lies in its multiplicity of interpretation and its ability to speak anew to every generation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *MQR* (April 1944): 3-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> The Luther Blissetts now refer to themselves as the "Wu Mings," Chinese for "no name." See "Wu Ming: A Summary Account" at <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/biography.html>, accessed 11 June 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Luther Blissett, *Q: A Novel*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Harcourt, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Finger pays some attention to the neglected branch of Italian and Polish Anabaptism in *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). See pp. 40-45 for an introduction by a more traditional historian.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The German Revolutions: "The Peasant War in Germany" and "Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Quoted in C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 405-06.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Peachey, "Marxist Historiography of the Radical Reformation: Causality or Covariation?" in *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, Vol. I., ed. Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis, MO: Foundation for Reformation Research, 1970), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Friesen, "The Marxist Interpretation of Anabaptism." in Meyer, 17-34.

<sup>15</sup> *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives. Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, Vol. IX, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Adolf Laube, "Radicalism as a Research Problem in the History of Early Reformation" in Hillerbrand, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Günter Vogler, "The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster in the Tension Between Anabaptism and Imperial Policy" in Hillerbrand, 105.

<sup>19</sup> For a more recent materialist slant on early Anabaptism, see Adolf Holl's brilliantly readable but similarly short-sighted account of Müntzer in *The Left Hand of God: A Biography of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1997), 221-39.

<sup>20</sup> Blissett, 404.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 228, 230.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> “If such a man existed somewhere, he would have to be more precious than gold, because he would be the most powerful weapon against Frederick of Saxony and Martin Luther.” *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> “May I be prepared to say in all frankness that, in the face of the spread of Anabaptism, the advent of the Lutheran faith is a great deal more desirable.” *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-94.

<sup>34</sup> The Wu Mings claim that “the practical critique of intellectual property had been at the core of the Luther Blissett project’s activities.” Wu Ming, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Snyder, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Laube, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Peachey, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Bifo on Luther Blissett’s ‘Q’”: [www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9907-msg00102.html](http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9907-msg00102.html), 27 July 1999. Accessed 11 June 2004.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

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*At the time of writing, Jeremy Garber was entering the final year of an MDiv program at AMBS in Elkhart, IN.*

Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

This creative book engages the fact of Christian expansion in the world from the point of view of culturally sensitive Christians concerned that people are “abandoning their values and way of life in favor of a foreign religion” (113). Lamin Sanneh’s overall objective is to catalyze an attitude shift in the academy and post-Christian societies that are predisposed to view world Christianity as “the creature of impulses originating in the west” rather than as the result of “mother tongue mediation and local response” (85).

Despite his description of Protestant *sola scriptura* use of the Bible as breeding sectarianism and reducing the Bible to “ecumenical shrapnel,” Sanneh shows the positive role Bible translation has played in the expansion of Christianity worldwide. Challenging popular assumptions that world Christianity threatens a return to Christendom—what he calls “Global Christianity”—and that Bible translation necessarily results in an injection of outside power interests into indigenous communities, Sanneh is unambiguous that the Bible in the vernacular “does not coerce nor compel.” Translation “guarantees nothing beyond the fact that an inculturated personal response is a necessary and legitimate basis for moral and social empowerment” (123). Sanneh’s own experience of conversion likely influences his opinion that indigenous communities are discovering Christianity and not vice versa. (See Jonathan Bonk’s interview of Sanneh in *Christianity Today* 47:10 (Oct. 2003), 112-113, at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/010/35.112.html>.)

By using the pedagogical style of interview and dialogue, Sanneh covers a vast amount of intellectual territory, exposing a multitude of questions about how western people who value “cultural sensitivity, diversity, and inclusiveness” can relate with solidarity to Christians outside the west. His ability to compare and contrast expanding Christianity with Islamic resurgence makes this book even more relevant and useful.

Sanneh’s primary reference point is Africa. His thesis depends on a commitment to religion and state separation, while affirming that Christianity values human worth in a way that can have positive influence on political structures. It remains to be seen if his explanation of authentic local response to Bible translation can be applied to the Latin American context, where Pentecostalism is blazing within the residue of imperial Christianity.

Sanneh's book provides a shelter under which people from widely divergent Christian commitments could meet and discuss its multiple implications. The author is confident that intentional dialogue between the west and the rest of the world regarding their different experiences of Christianity will result in increased mutual respect and understanding, as well as in the "fruit of obedience and the gift of genuine solidarity" (6). By voicing a wide variety of questions and exposing commonly held presuppositions about western involvement in the expansion of world Christianity, Sanneh convincingly argues that Christianity has broken "the cultural filibuster of its western domestication" and explains why "attitudes must shift to acknowledge this new situation" (130). This book has something for everyone: sceptic or missionary, scholar or layperson.

*Susan Kennel Harrison*, ThD student, Toronto School of Theology

Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes, eds. *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004.

Christian pilgrimages are becoming increasingly popular. Each year thousands of pilgrims travel to Iona, Taize, Santiago, Medjugorje, Jerusalem and other locations of religious significance. In Western Europe alone, 60-70 million religiously motivated travelers annually find their way to sacred sites. Is this burgeoning practice an outbreak of genuine spiritual fervor? Or are pilgrimages simply an elite form of religious tourism—respectable entertainment for affluent Christians?

*Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* provides a thorough discussion of the current resurgence of Christian pilgrimage. Editors Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes organized an academic conference held in January 2000 by the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education in England. This collection of conference essays examines the phenomenon of pilgrimage from biblical, theological, historical, literary, and anthropological perspectives in order to contribute to creating a coherent theology of pilgrimage. Although excellent descriptive and historical studies of pilgrimage are now available, much less attention has been given to theology. This book seeks to remedy that lack.

Defining pilgrimage as “a journey to a special or holy place as a way of making an impact on one’s life with the revelation of God associated with that place” (xii), the authors quickly acknowledge that pilgrimage is not unique to Christianity. Pilgrimages flourish in many religious traditions (e.g., Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca) and even appear in secular life (e.g., the continuing popularity of places like Graceland, home of singer Elvis Presley). Even though the idea of pilgrimages has been discredited and denounced at certain points in Christian history, such as the Reformation, the authors are especially interested in examining the enduring desire to go on pilgrimage that seems to be located deep in human experience and spirituality.

The book contributes two main ingredients to discerning a theology of pilgrimage. One is a careful review of Old and New Testament perspectives on pilgrimage, in which both their literal and metaphorical role is examined, along with the relativizing of sacred space experienced in the coming of Jesus and the missionary activity of the church. As one essay states, “If God has an address on earth, it is no longer in Jerusalem but in the incarnate Logos” (39)—and, we might add, in the community called by Christ’s name. The second ingredient is a thoughtful discussion of the spiritual formation potential of pilgrimage. Although literal pilgrimages were not encouraged by the NT church, and despite the ethical and economic issues raised in the Reformation and since then, many Christians long to see and experience the places where Jesus lived, taught, suffered, died, and rose again. Also, the lure of locations associated with the saints or vibrant Christian communities continues to have broad appeal.

Recognizing their enduring fascination, the writers suggest that pilgrimages potentially nourish both personal faith and a lively sense of connection with the Christian church in places near and far. “At its best,” one writer says, “pilgrimage is a seeking after roots that refresh” (88). Our imaginations are stimulated, our minds gain new understanding, our vision of the church’s mission is expanded, and our hearts are renewed as we personally encounter the faith of other Christians. At the same time the writers denounce the exploitation of religious heritage sites and caution against the escapism that sends some people seeking religious thrills in places far from home.

As someone who has led spiritual pilgrimages to ancient, medieval, and modern Celtic Christian sites, I am aware of both the potential and pitfalls of pilgrimage. The sense of Christian community that emerges among a group of pilgrims and the transforming encounters with local Christians in pilgrimage

locations are wondrous gifts. So is the opportunity for prayer and reflection in places of incredible natural beauty, such as the Isle of Iona in Scotland, Glendalough in Ireland, or Holy Isle in England. Because pilgrimage often strips one of the usual sense of security and certainty, pilgrims are opened to new perspectives on life, vocation, and the church. Admittedly, no pilgrimage can guarantee such an outcome. As the ancient Irish Christians understood so well,

*To go to Rome  
Is much of trouble, little of profit;  
The King whom thou seekest there,  
Unless thou bring him with thee, thou wilt not find.*

– Kuno Meyer (tr.), *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*  
(Constable, 1911, new ed., 1959), 100

*Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* opens up key issues for the church and provides a rich biblical framework as well as historical and pastoral perspectives. Perhaps a useful next step would be to engage in this conversation with economically deprived parts of the church. Are the gifts of pilgrimage meant only for those who can afford to travel or are they meant for the whole church?

*Marlene Kropf*, Mennonite Church USA, Elkhart, IN

Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004.

This book's title recognizes and describes its subject matter, namely the diachronic identity that defines the continuity and discontinuity between the original Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands and its development into denominationalism in the following centuries. The author contends that the sixteenth-century Anabaptist concerns and character were essentially preserved in the seventeenth-century Dutch Mennonite confessions as their socio-economic situation and political standing changed rather radically.

The study focuses on the seventeenth-century Dutch confessions, especially three: the "Short Confession" of 1610, the Jan Cents Confession

of 1630, and the Dordrecht Confession of 1632. Each of these confessional statements represents what might be called denominational factions within the Holland Anabaptist-Mennonite movement—the Waterlanders, the Frisian-High German, and the Flemish. Each statement represents continuing social-cultural developments, and the author tries to show how the groups attempted to maintain authentic continuity with the original movement in Holland and North Germany, which itself was highly fractured.

Koop notes that the nature and uses of these confessions characterize them as “confessions,” not creeds, and locate them within the Anabaptist movement. In his words, “the [confessional] tradition is not some normative, externally-fixed authority . . . ; rather, it is a constantly changing expression of belief, representing a plurality of perspectives, which can provide an orientation for theological reflection. . . .” (22). Although too often unsuccessful, a good number of the confessions within the purview of this study were intended for rapprochement, not as definitions of orthodoxy for the exclusion of those who differed.

In addition to their function of seeking consensus, confessions in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have provided self-identity markers and teaching standards, as the author notes. They depict “a unique and coherent tradition shaped by the broader Christian milieu” (114). In general they are characterized by a close approximation to biblical language and voluminous textual referencing. They approach theological definitions more from the perspective of ecclesial, experiential, and ethical applications of Christian behavior than from technical precision. However, as one might expect, they reflect the time and place of their origin, and generally follow Protestant and Catholic theological precedents. Judging from these seventeenth-century confessions, one concludes that their framers were very aware of, and engaged in, the ongoing theological and ecclesiastical debates of the century.

Besides filling a gap in English language historical studies of Anabaptist-Mennonite developments, this descriptive analysis of seventeenth-century Mennonite statements of faith when Dutch Anabaptists were moving from their original societal position as a radical *Gemeinde* to participation in the politico-economic order (*Gesellschaft*) is highly relevant to the twenty-first North American Mennonite church experience. As Mennonite denominational groups continue to splinter and regroup, the need for self-identity and reconciling consensus statements continues unabated! And when we add the globalization

factor of mission expansion and Mennonite World organization, these needs are maximized. Churches around the world that are related to the European and American Mennonite churches are asking what it means to be Mennonite and/or Anabaptist. Karl Koop is to be commended on a carefully researched, well-written, and thoroughly documented essay.

C. Norman Kraus (Professor emeritus, Goshen College), Harrisonburg, VA

Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

In *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, Thomas Finger first sketches today's North Atlantic cultural context of a globalizing society in transition from modern to postmodern cultures. Is theology with its "universal truths" able to engage "postmodernity's affective, popular, fragmenting and pluriform sensibilities" without appearing imperialistic? He believes theology must face this challenge and submits that aid may come from an unexpected source: the small, unassuming Anabaptist communions, descended from the Radical Reformation. These communions may offer help to a society with postmodern tendencies and possibly bridge the gaps between the historical Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches, and between them and the evangelical churches (11f, 103).

Part one (chs. 1-4) deals with "the contemporary and historical context," including a masterful sketch of Anabaptism's "tumultuous beginnings" (polygenesis) in diverse regions; part two (chs. 5-7) treats "the coming of the new creation," which the different Anabaptist groups held as their common center (157) despite differing theological emphases; and part three (chs. 8-10) outlines "the convictional framework" that powered historic Anabaptists and is needed today for engaging the world with the Gospel. Throughout, the author critically relates the theological works of current Anabaptist-Mennonites to the legacy of the Anabaptists, and creates a dialogue between these and historic and current "mainline" and "marginal" theologies.

Although discussion of "The Last Things" comes at the end (ch. 10), the eschatological dimension reverberates throughout in the theme tying the book together: "The coming of the new creation" (106). This theme, Finger

argues, necessarily involved three distinct-yet-inseparable dimensions in early Anabaptist groups: the “personal, communal, and missional” (106). In contrast, he says, most current Anabaptist theologians focus largely on the communal (and perhaps missional) dimension(s) at the expense of the personal dimension. Their soteriology concentrates, like that of ecumenical churches, on “horizontal” issues and suppresses the “vertical” transcendent dimension, leaving the latter mostly to evangelical churches.

Overall, Finger’s knowledgeable, friendly-critical engagement of various faith traditions results in truly fruitful theological dialogue and mutual learning. Thus, ecumenical, post-Christendom churches are today questioning the adequacy of infant baptism, Christian involvement in so-called Just War, and how to witness from the margins of society, whereas evangelicals are beginning to address all aspects of life with the gospel. While historic Anabaptist believers’ and peace churches can speak to these issues, they in turn can learn from the rich theological-liturgical heritage of ecumenical churches and from the dynamic witness of evangelical churches (101). From this dialogue, the author undertakes to “construct” a richer contemporary theology for all churches, in which all traditions are taken seriously, with the Bible still as his sovereign norm (175).

Despite the book’s considerable achievement, Finger sometimes sells short the work of others. For instance, is John Howard Yoder “reducing” baptism and the Lord’s Supper to “social-ethical dimensions” (184, 207, 180) or is he elevating (“transubstantiating”) these “community practices” (bridging ethnic divisions, food sharing) into their proper eschatological framework, when he says that in them the resurrected Christ becomes present among us? Finger is reading Yoder’s work reductionistically. Moreover, the three core dimensions, rightly emphasized by Finger, are all pervasively present in Yoder’s theology even though he opposes individualism. Yoder’s church is as much in the “public square,” living “before the eyes of the watching world” (Yoder’s phrase), as Finger’s church aspires to be (308). Nor does Yoder envision an isolated, purist church, but advocates both its “conscientious participation” in society and its “conscientious objection” to it (Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* [2nd ed., 1994]). For Yoder the church is a sacramental presence in society: “The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately” (Yoder, *Body Politics* [1992, rep. 2001]). Finger argues similarly: “The church . . . makes God’s desires for all people visible as its members live and work among them” (255; cf. 321).

Further, Finger demurs on “Murphy, Ellis, Kraus, and Yoder . . . regard[ing] the powers’ redemption as a mission task” (308). According to Finger, only Col. 1:20 considers the powers redeemable (313); he himself is pessimistic about it (314). In dealing with the biblical “principalities and powers” passages, Finger could have found important resources in Hendrik Berkhof (*Christ and the Powers*, 1962, 1977) and in Yoder’s treatment of “Christ and Power” (*The Politics of Jesus*, ch. 8.). In view of the importance he places on the “missional dimension,” I wonder why Mennonite and other-denominational missiologists are so sparsely represented in his discussion. Examples might include Jacob Loewen, Donald Jacobs, Hans Kasdorf, Lois Barrett, James Krabill, David Bosch, Andrew Walls, and C. René Padilla.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the Anabaptist-descended churches and indeed the world family of churches are in the author’s debt for presenting in one volume this wide-ranging, substantive, biblical, historical, constructive theology. I expect it will generate rich ecumenical dialogue for some time to come.

*Titus F. Guenther*, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB

Daniel Schipani, *The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling*. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003.

*The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling* is a carefully argued, thoroughly documented book offering a biblical and theological model that addresses what the author sees as two primary problems facing the field. The first is “a sense of incompetence on the part of many pastoral caregivers in the face of pastoral counseling clinical specialization and professional certification” (4). The second is a “lack of congruence and continuity between pastoral counseling and other ministry arts, especially teaching, preaching, mentoring, and spiritual guidance” (4-5). Schipani attributes these problems to the predominance of the clinical-medical model concerned with “curing” pathology, and the existentialist-anthropological paradigm “with autonomy and self realization as its primary goals” (7). His model reconnects pastoral counseling to its ecclesial foundation and identifies the minister as the normative pastoral counselor.

Schipani proposes the biblical motif of *wisdom* in the context of the *reign of God* as an overarching metaphor for pastoral counseling, and suggests *wisdom in the light of God* as a guiding principle. Jesus, he states, models the one who most fully embodies the wisdom of God. The wisdom tradition illuminates fundamental existential questions such as “How shall we live in conformity with the normative culture?” and “How shall we fashion together the kind of world that pleases God?” (39) Wisdom in the light of God provides a framework for counseling that offers guidance to live wisely, discernment between cultural wisdom and God’s alternative wisdom, perspectives on wholeness and holiness, and reflections that connect human experience to the faith tradition. Setting wisdom in the context of the reign of God keeps in focus “the ultimate normative culture in which God’s dream for the world is being realized and will be fully realized beyond history” (39). Concern for peace, justice, ethics, transformation, right living, salvation, and liberation are all contained within an understanding of that reign.

The author likens pastoral counselors to biblical sages, the practical theologians of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. They both reflected on the tradition and kept its meaning “practical and life-oriented” (42). While acknowledging the value of psychology and other human sciences, Schipani recalls counseling to its roots in the biblical tradition and calls for “awakening, nurturing, and developing people’s moral and spiritual intelligence” (54).

This book raises several questions. One of the primary theological and philosophical questions underlying counseling is, How do people change? Do they change in the presence and context of an enhancing, liberating, and affirming relationship, or through transforming negative cognitions to more realistic beliefs and views? Schipani cautions against a “relational model” with its connection to Rogerian and psychoanalytic approaches to psychotherapy (95-96), and promotes a cognitive approach that assists people to develop and live into a new vision of reality for themselves and their world.

But surely our theology is inherently relational. That we are created in the image of God is a relational affirmation; the Christian affirmation is that we most fully know ourselves in relation to God through Christ. And while Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, his approach to ministry was relational. I suggest that pastoral counselors not promote one approach as more theologically grounded than another, but instead ask which one best suits the needs of the care receiver.

This concern leads to my second question. Schipani rightly notes that a relational model has greater potential to create conditions for boundary violations, including sexual misconduct, and requires engagement with psychological mechanisms such as transference, counter-transference, projection, and resistance. This is beyond the training of most congregational pastors, whose focus is more short-term and problem focused (96). But can't we affirm both their invaluable counseling, and that of those with specialized training to work with care receivers who may respond to a more long-term, depth, relational approach?<sup>1</sup>

This then leads to my third question. Couldn't the role of "specialized pastoral counselor" be seen as a missional activity done on behalf of the church, and the counselor be seen as a missionary? Just as contemporary missionaries use the tools and training of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, cultural studies, and social psychology in addition to Biblical studies in order to be a "presence" or witness, so a pastoral counselor uses psychological tools, among others, to provide a ministry of care and witness to persons on the edges psychologically or ecclesiologically, or both. And just as a missionary is commissioned by the church and accountable to it, can't the work of a specialized counselor be blessed in the same way?<sup>2</sup>

In this volume Schipani wrestles with important questions. He moves beyond challenging what was the predominant pastoral counseling paradigm to offer a thoughtfully constructed biblical and theological framework with guidelines for this work. It is a significant contribution that will be most useful for pastors and pastoral students who engage in time-limited, solution-focused pastoral counseling interventions.

*Marianne Mellinger*, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Self-psychology, Object Relations, and more recently Intersubjectivity, are all relational models of psychotherapy that offer an alternative to the existentialist-anthropological paradigm.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of Specialized Pastoral Counseling as a missional activity was first raised with me by John Hershberger in a personal conversation. It is more fully developed in Brian Grant's *A Theology of Pastoral Psychotherapy* (Haworth Press, 2001).

Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

This compilation of articles approaches reading scripture as an art rather than a science. The critical methodologies that have dominated and limited the objectives of Bible study in seminaries and universities are here demoted from masters to servants that assist in revealing God's "action to rescue a lost and broken world" (xiv) in order to "claim us and make us into new people" (xvi).

The articles are guided by "nine theses on the interpretation of scripture," the product of *The Scripture Project*, a seminar of scholars and pastors that met at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey from 1998 to 2002 to "recover the church's rich heritage of biblical interpretation in a dramatically changed cultural environment" (xv). These theses unapologetically accept the New Testament's witness to Jesus' identity and treat the Old Testament as part of a single drama for which the death and resurrection of Jesus is the climax. Members of the Church, in which many academics find their home, should welcome this willingness to question the presuppositions of critical scholarship and to consider ways of reading that will reclaim the Bible as the central, authoritative voice in the Church.

The first of four sets of essays, provided by Ellen R. Davis, Robert W. Jenson, Richard Bauckham, and David C. Steinmetz, should be read by all teachers of the Bible in church colleges and seminaries. The critique of higher criticism and modernity is not new, but the articulation of how we move towards a confessional approach to scripture is refreshing. The essays address a number of modern tendencies including the failure of Bible courses to inform faith, the paucity of sermons based upon scripture, and the steep decline in biblical literacy. They offer a framework by which to acknowledge the authority of scripture without shackling oneself to a notion of truth that both limits the capacity for scientific inquiry and the exercise of imagination and denies the presence of troubling passages.

For example, Davis discusses how the OT can be read to illuminate our understanding of Jesus without ignoring the rich tradition of Jewish interpretation. She emphasizes that the Bible should not be reduced to the single theme of salvation but should be read as a revelation of God's nature

and will for God's people. Bauckham's essay tackles how we approach scripture as one coherent story without straying into the meta-narrative reading that has legitimized various forms of imperialism in the past.

The essays in part two, provided by Brian E. Daley S.J., James C. Howell, William Stacy Johnson, Christian McSpadden, and L. Gregory Jones, explore the recovery of reading practices employed in the early Church but neglected by modern methodologies. In particular, Daley's essay "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" and Jones's essay, in which he invites us to read scripture the way that Augustine and Martin Luther King, Jr. did, may inspire a renewed engagement with scripture. McSpadden's essay "Preaching Scripture Faithfully in a Post-Christendom Church" encourages pastors to preach from the Bible by directing them away from a naïve or literalist reading or a dry explication of meaning and toward the creation of a space for wondering about a story or passage.

In the third section, subtitled "Reading Difficult Texts," Ellen F. Davis introduces the awkward language of "critical traditioning" in order to draw our attention to a tendency within scripture to challenge passages that cease to be edifying or ethical. R.W.L. Moberly, Gary A. Anderson, Richard B. Hays, and Marianne Meye Thompson then illustrate how to use the nine guiding theses to reinvigorate our reading of a selection of passages. The final section contains six sermons given by Davis and Hays, along with brief reflections on how interpretation of lectionary passages informs their homiletics.

Warning: Anabaptist readers may find they must suppress feelings of pride. Authors frequently arrive at a point from which early Anabaptism began. Repeatedly, they conclude that if we read scripture with the presupposition it is making a demand upon us – not simply telling us what to believe but rather in what we should place our trust – we will be called to a life of self-giving and humility.

*Jo-Ann A. Brant*, Professor of Bible, Goshen College, Goshen, IN

Sean Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story*. London: T & T Clark International, 2004.

The quest for the historical Jesus has imagined his first-century Galilean setting as either Gentile borderland or Jewish homeland. In line with his previous study (*Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988]), Sean Freyne's *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean* re-asserts the latter alternative and offers a careful rehabilitation of the Jesus of gospel tradition. For Freyne, the dual context of Israel's foundational story, and the movement that subsequently came to present Jesus within that story, locates the historical Jesus and defines him as both thoroughly Jewish and deeply Galilean. Although Freyne also references archaeological data and sociological theory, it is the narrative tradition of the gospels and particularly how it participates in the reception of the Hebrew scriptures in the Second Temple period that directs his inquiry. For him, this tradition stands closer to the social reality of first-century Galilee than do later reconstructions "of our own making."

However, the book is less about the material constraints of Jesus' Galilean ministry than the Galilean Jesus' self-conscious engagement with the religious tradition of Israel. Freyne suggests that Jesus' attitude toward the ecology of Galilee was grounded in the Israelite tradition of the creator God (ch. 2). He finds in Jesus' travel from barren desert to fertile lower Galilee a sense of "potential blessedness" (42-43); in his association with Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, an affirmation of the divine overthrow of chaos (53); and in his tour of "the Hermon region" of upper Galilee, a consciousness of the sacred character of the natural world (57-58). Freyne's Galilean Jesus likewise engages the Israelite tradition of election (ch. 3).

If ideal Israel functions within the scriptural tradition to express both the universalist impulse of the Genesis narratives and the triumphalist impulse of the Deuteronomist, then Jesus' interest in the "territorially marginalized" Jews of upper Galilee and openness to their pagan environs locates him securely within the former impulse. Freyne encounters much the same fault line within the Zion tradition of Israel (ch. 4). Even in Isaiah, he argues, Zion functions as a symbol of the restoration of Israel and salvation of the nations as well as the triumph of Israel and enslavement of the nations. Like the Isaian "servant

community” (Is 65:8-15; 66:2,5,14), Freyne’s Jesus embraces the former, though not without prophetic critique; only insofar as it could include especially the socially and geographically marginalized of Galilee (whether Jew or Gentile) did Zion remain for Jesus a meaningful symbol (116).

Chapters five and six turn increasingly toward the confrontation of tradition and empire. Freyne sees first-century Galilee as characterized by a threat to Jewish identity like that posed by Antiochus Epiphanes in the mid-second century BCE (126). Accordingly, the apocalyptic response of Daniel’s “wise ones” to that crisis (Dan 1:4,17; 11:33-35; 12:3) provides an analogue to the response of Jesus and his followers to the challenge of the Roman Empire. Jesus’ apocalyptic imagination is only further evinced in his avoidance of the Herodian centres of Sepphoris and Tiberias, his critique of Herodian rule (Mk 10:42-46; 11:1-10), and his confrontation of imperial power with the kingdom of God. Jesus’ resistance to that power also challenges the hegemony of the Temple aristocracy in Jerusalem. His attack on the Temple system is seen as a call for radical renewal according to the inclusive Isaian vision of the eschatological temple (155). Since such prophetic “globalization” of Israel’s God had always incurred the resistance of both religious and political authorities, the result for Jesus cannot have been unexpected (168).

Freyne’s assimilation of the canonical framework will doubtless be found problematic. He privileges such narratives as Acts 10:36-41 (Jesus’ “basis-biography”), Lk 4:16-30 (Jesus’ inaugural address), Q 13:34 (Jesus’ prophetic lament over Jerusalem), and Mk 11:15-19 (Jesus’ Isaian condemnation of the Temple) without attending to their redactional intent, and presumes a degree of scriptural engagement on Jesus’ part that begs the question of his “inherited tradition.” The result too often is a Jewish Galilean indistinguishable from his canonical counterpart. Nevertheless, Freyne’s contribution is both timely and erudite. Few scholars command a comparable knowledge of first-century Galilee and fewer still have turned it toward a study of Jesus’ self-understanding. The author’s privileging of Jesus’ inherited religious tradition as the primary context for reconstruction of the quest is as productive as it will be controversial.

*Rene Baergen*, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto