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Foreword

We are very pleased to present, as the centerpiece of this issue, “Christian Theology Today: What is at Stake?,” the 2007 Benjamin Eby Lecture given by our esteemed colleague A. James Reimer at Conrad Grebel University College.

To round out the main section of the issue, we offer two scholarly articles that also have a theological orientation, and a Reflection piece. The first article is “Baptismal Robes or Camel’s Hair? A Theological Response to the ‘Politics of Becoming’” by Anthony Siegrist. The second article, “St. Gregory of Nyssa, Anabaptism and the Creeds,” is by Andrew Klager, who specifically engages Reimer and other Mennonite scholars in his discussion. The Reflection piece, “Dialogue of the Feet: a Mennonite Sojourn Through Mindanao,” is contributed by Jon Rudy.

Also appearing, after a one-issue absence, is the book review section, with a total of 11 recent titles receiving thoughtful assessment by our reviewers. Regular CGR readers will recall that the CGR website offers all our wide-ranging book reviews published since 2006 and is updated between print issues. (Because of space limitations, CGR print issues occasionally must focus only on article-length pieces, with book reviews going immediately to the website and then appearing in the next available print issue.)

Upcoming issues will include the 2008 Bechtel Lectures, “The Mennonite Experience in Paraguay,” by Alfred Neufeld; papers from a San Diego symposium on J. Denny Weaver’s *The Nonviolent Atonement*; and a host of research articles and other items inviting close examination by readers.

We invite submissions for consideration – and we are always happy to welcome new subscribers, of course.

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

2007 BENJAMIN EBY LECTURE

Christian Theology Today: What is at Stake?

A. James Reimer

The Theological Agenda

Several years ago I was called upon to respond to author-journalist Tom Harpur at a public event at Waterloo North Mennonite Church. Harpur had just come out with his best-selling book, *The Pagan Christ*, in which he denies the actual historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ He says there's nothing new in Christianity. All its claims are plagiarized from ancient pre-biblical sources. What early Christian texts have "stolen" from pagan sources and transformed is the notion of an "inner Christ" in each person. It is this pre-Christian concept of the "inner Christ" that religious people need to recover for today. Harpur's book struck a sympathetic chord in thousands, if not millions, of people who yearn for some kind of spiritual renewal. In my response to him, I acknowledged the obvious relevance of his writings for many but disagreed sharply with his assumptions and his understanding of early Christianity and what is needed today. I was clearly in the minority in that audience and was almost booed off the stage. What I want to argue here is that the kind of assumptions we bring to contemporary global issues, including the yearning for spirituality, are of vital importance.

Christian theology has a responsibility to address the burning issues of the day in a way that people can understand:

1. Global warming has now replaced the nuclear crisis of my generation as the most serious threat to the survival of the world and, with it, the human species and every species on earth.
2. Violence, war, and hunger ravage human populations in various parts of the globe, accentuated by recent "terrorism"

and by the “war against terror” unfortunately labelled by some as a “clash of civilizations.”

3. Modern technology, perhaps more than any other force, is homogenizing the contemporary world as a kind of monolithic tyranny that reigns over the global village – computers and the cyberspace communities they create are the supreme symbols of modern communication, creating virtual communities rather than real communities.

4. The imperialism of modern liberal democracy is willing to make strange alliances with totalitarian regimes in its attempt, ironically, to colonize, democratize, and “free” developing countries, and is ready to use violence in order to do so.

5. There exist dominations of various kinds: women by men, the poor by the rich, homosexuals by heterosexuals, visible and invisible minorities by majorities.

6. We live in an age of pluralism; in modern and postmodern societies diverse religious and non-religious groups co-exist, sometimes with conflicting ideologies, seeking both to remain faithful to their convictions and to live beside each other within the same temporal and physical space.

7. A pervasive secularism drives many in their daily lives, a disillusionment with all religious institutions, including the Christian church, and the loss of the symbolic power of traditional religious language, especially in the western world.

8. A massive new yearning for spirituality is evident throughout western secular culture, both inside and outside the church, which is frequently but inadequately met by traditional religious institutions and dogmas.

These are but some of the realities of the contemporary world that responsible Christian theology, as I understand it, is called upon to address. I have tried

to do so in many of my own writings, both scholarly and popular. In this lecture I will not speak to these issues directly, even though each deserves careful theological reflection and Christian action. What I will do is address them indirectly, by examining the theological assumptions and convictions that underlie our way of looking at the world and motivate our actions. For I believe that the beliefs and motivations behind our actions are as important as the actions themselves. There are those like theologian Gordon Kaufman, who identifies himself as a Mennonite, who have argued that traditional Christian beliefs about God, the world, and human beings are no longer viable in the face of the challenges we now face. What is called for is a thorough re-conceptualization of God. What is necessary if we are going to solve our global problems, these thinkers say, is to deconstruct the past and reconstruct ways of understanding divine, human, and earthly reality that are more adequate for today.

In my theological work I have argued strenuously against this deconstructive/re-constructive way of doing theology. I have consistently challenged my students, colleagues, and academic peers, both inside and outside the Mennonite community, to retrieve the classical and pre-modern tradition in creative and imaginative ways in order to address today's complex issues. I have taken this approach not only because I believe the ancient way of looking at the world is more profound than the modern and postmodern, but because I believe the message of Jesus and the Apostles, including the historic church's basic understanding of that message, to be true.

This does not mean I believe the church throughout its history has always been right in the decisions it has made: its identification with power and the use of force against the marginalized in society, including women, is only one instance of where it has been wrong. But the church's basic confession of the one living God in three persons – creator, redeemer, and reconciler of all things – I take to be true. I believe any attempts to fight for social and economic equality and justice, and to save the world from nuclear and ecological calamity on our own, without this confession of faith in the one living God who has a purpose for this world and to whom we are accountable, is bound for disaster. The foremost challenge for theology is how to translate this “inside-churchly” language into words, concepts,

symbols, metaphors, analogies, and images that are understandable to those both inside and outside the church.

Theology as Faith Seeking Understanding

Elsewhere I have identified the task of contemporary theology as follows: “Christian theology in our time calls for a disciplined imagination – the daring exploration of new frontiers of intellectual space; a fidelity to the ancient truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition; an empathetic engagement with all Christians, all faiths, and all peoples; a high regard for nature, experience, and all forms of knowledge; and a resolute witness to peace, justice and reconciliation in a world of violence.”² Christian theology should not be so obsessed with loyalty to the past that it blinds its eyes to the challenges of today: ecology; violence and war; hunger; technology; imperialism; domination; pluralism; secularism; spirituality. Yet it dare not be so enamoured by every current societal agenda that it betrays its historic texts and convictions for the sake of relevance. I suggest, together with Stanley Hauerwas, for example, that “survival” is not our most basic and fundamental motivation for action as Christians. To make survival the ultimate goal is to undermine that very survival itself. The proper motivation is fidelity and allegiance to the prophetic, apostolic, and confessional tradition as it has been handed down to us. While theology seeks imaginatively to interpret and reinterpret its Judeo-Christian heritage for today, its imagination is not unstructured and unbounded. The Christian imagination is not an undisciplined one; it is disciplined by the historic grammar of faith that I identify as confession, doctrine, creed, and dogma. This is a family of terms that represent the truth claims of Christian faith.

I agree with the medieval theologian Anselm’s definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding” or “believing in order to understand.” Nevertheless, I take the relation between “faith” and “understanding” to be more complex and dialectical than this definition suggests. I propose that the life of Peter the Apostle is a prototype of how we might understand the relation of faith to theology. The biblical account of Peter’s rootedness in the Jewish tradition, his initial response to Jesus, his subsequent confession of Jesus as the “Christ,” his pathetic attempt to walk on water and his denial of Christ at the time of the crucifixion, his great sermons after the resurrection

and ascension of Christ, and his mature writings as an elder churchman reflect the sequence of theology from historic community to faith; from existential faith encounter to rational reflection; and from personal narrative to systematic theology.

In the following remarks I use the story of Peter as a way of looking at the relation of faith to understanding and the challenges of contemporary theology. I rely on seven moments in the biblical account of Peter for identifying the assumptions guiding modern theological thought and action.

Theology as Narrative Communal Formation

First, Peter had a Jewish past. We can assume that he was nurtured within a believing Jewish community as described in Deuteronomy 6, where it is instructed on how to pass on its beliefs to succeeding generations. After the Ten Commandments are set forth in Deuteronomy 5, chapter 6 admonishes Jewish families to teach these statutes and ordinances to their children and children's children so that they may fear the Lord their God all the days of their life.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-8)

We have heard much in past decades from so-called postmodern, post-liberal theologians like Hauerwas, Alastair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and James McClendon about *narrative* theology. These theologians repudiate what is referred to as modern “foundationalism.” Among some Mennonite theologians there is a strong affinity with this “non” or even “anti” foundationalism; some of them have claimed Mennonite theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder as one of their number. But what is meant by foundationalism? It is the notion that underlying all particular voices and

communities there is a universal rationality common to all human beings, no matter what tradition they come from. In short, there are universal truths that are accessible to all rational beings. This is what postmodern narrative theologians reject.

Instead, they argue that there are many rationalities and ways of looking at the world, each one with its own linguistic coherence. For example, one person may call another person “irrational” in her arguments. This may well be true, but it assumes that underlying both arguments is a rationality common to each, and that if there is disagreement, then one person must be rational (right), the other irrational (wrong). Postmoderns would claim that both might be inherently coherent and rational but have different rationalities. In the postmodern context, there are diverse communal narratives, each with its own rationality. Different cultural-linguistic communities of formation shape the way people speak, conceptualize, believe, and act, quite differently from each other.

The Apostle Peter, postmoderns might say, was raised and formed in a particular community with a particular language and narrative (the Hebraic). Christians are, or at least ought to be, similarly shaped by a narrative community (the church). In my theological work I have showed some sympathy for this kind of narrative theology; I firmly believe that our tradition shapes us linguistically, culturally, and religiously. I have also welcomed the attention to imagination and the language of metaphor, symbol, and story that frequently comes with this kind of narrative theology. Feminist theologians, like Sallie McFague, have made an important contribution in emphasizing the narrative and metaphoric nature of theology, in particular our concepts of God. McFague calls us to find new non-patriarchal metaphors for God.

However, I have some reservations about the narrative theology movement as a whole, especially when seen as the only legitimate approach. For one thing, it is not clear what constitutes coherent “community” today. We are faced with not only a multiplicity of overlapping communities but the disintegration of traditional communal and human relationships altogether, in favor of individual experience or virtual internet human interaction. For another, narrative thinkers tend to suspect all forms of foundationalism, often including a rejection of all universal and propositional truth claims. While unaided human reason may not be able to prove rationally the truth of faith

claims, yet the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) hold to universal truths that transcend narrative. The Ten Commandments of Deuteronomy 5 and the great commandment of Deuteronomy 6 are instances of such claims.

Theology as Existential Encounter with the Living God

Second, we note Peter's unconditional response to Jesus' call at the seaside to leave his fishing nets and follow. In Matthew 4 we read of Jesus calling the first disciples at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, shortly after his baptism and temptations in the desert.

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matt. 4:18-20)

The critical word here is “immediately.” There may have been events in Peter's life leading up to this moment – we have already identified the Jewish community in which he was raised – but in the biblical account above there is no mention of these. We are simply told of Jesus' call to follow and Peter's unconditional response. It represents the initial, personal encounter between Jesus and Peter, the second moment on the way from faith to systematic reflection. It is pre-reflective (to the extent that anything is pre-reflective). Peter is confronted by a call from the outside and responds existentially. Faith – and, I would also say, theology – assumes existential encounter and only subsequently leads to rational, systematic reflection. Unlike philosophy, for example, theology when properly understood presupposes a divine reality that encounters and grasps us.

The twentieth-century Existentialist movement in philosophy and theology, which had its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century with the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, has emphasized precisely the personal, *immediate*, vertical, particular, and decision character of human existence and action. Secular existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have pointed to the dark, irrational depths of existence. They identified the loss of meaning, and the anxiety that comes with this loss, as the central problem of the twentieth century with its two total wars and

the nuclear age. We live, these thinkers maintain, in an age without eternal horizons, without God, leaving us radically free without boundaries and limits to human action and mastery. We live on the abyss in the face of non-being and death, tempting us with anxiety and despair.

Christian existentialists like Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and to some extent the Catholic Karl Rahner and the early Karl Barth, influenced by Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, have incorporated important elements of existentialist philosophy into their theologies. Although quite different from each other, they all point to the irrational depths of human existence and the mysterious and awesome otherness of God who encounters us personally from beyond or from below, and addresses us. God is not an object of rational reflection (not an object beside other objects) but a *divine subject* who grasps us in an immediate sense. What is required in the face of meaninglessness is the “courage to be” and a “leap of faith.” Peter took just such a leap of faith in his encounter with the ultimate in Jesus’s call.

I have been critical of some forms of political theology, and of John Howard Yoder in his book *The Politics of Jesus*,³ for not taking seriously enough the language of personal encounter and the vertical-existential experience of God in their work. Modern pietism and the evangelical movement, despite their frequent suspicion of existentialism, perhaps constitute the wing of contemporary Christianity that has most diligently tried to preserve this personal and decision-character of the experience of God. In my own life this evangelical, existential dimension has always been very important, although with time and academic studies one is sometimes in danger of losing it and intellectualizing the faith.

Recently I was brought up short by an e-mail from a high school classmate of some forty years ago. “I don’t suppose you even remember me,” he wrote. “I still think fondly and with some shame of the days that we spent in my personal salvation in the Altona [Manitoba] high school. I made fun of you with my friends after our serious sessions, but never forgot my commitment to Christ. A few years ago when I was on my deathbed and after an out-of-body experience, I called on our Lord and said, ‘Lord, I have not been a bad person and I want to see the light.’ He did indeed extend His grace to me and I have never thanked you enough for that time you spent

with me to save my soul. I know I did not really appreciate what you did at the time, but the Lord knows I have appreciated it. Thanks again and God bless you.” Although this e-mail took me a bit by surprise – it reminded me of the little evangelist I once was – it impressed upon me once again the primary importance of a living encounter with God in all theological work.

The upsurge of interest in Eastern spirituality, and spirituality in general, in contemporary western society is indicative of the perennial yearning of human beings for an *immediate* encounter with a living divine reality. I recently received an e-mail from another friend, Alan Armstrong, who describes his long spiritual journey from a conservative evangelical background, through a period of religious scepticism and darkness, to forms of Christian orthodoxy at Conrad Grebel University College, and finally to Christian and Eastern mysticism. Here is what he says:

It really was the Buddhist techniques that helped me become a better Christian. I continue to confess my faith in Christ and I am a Christian, yet I have now been so fortunate to see first hand the profound truths that are present in other mystical traditions (my exposure is primarily to Buddhism and Sufism), and I believe that there is unity among these truths, that in some way, what we call “the Christ,” that mystical presence, is available to all humanity regardless of their religion. Having said all that, my desire right now is to practice my faith in Christian community, and to come to know the Christian mystics, to use my Buddhist teachers as a path back to the mystical, contemplative, center of Christianity.

Christian belief and theological reflection, no matter how profound, becomes dry intellectualism or obsessive moralism without the waters of spiritual experience and an immediate encounter with a living divine reality.

Theology as Dogma, the Grammar of Faith

However, a spirituality without form, no matter how dynamic, becomes distorted. In fact, Tillich goes so far as to say that “dynamics without form” is demonic, where the irrational dimensions of life take over.⁴ For Christianity, this is where doctrines, the central categories of the faith, are important. This

brings us to the third moment in Peter's life, his confession. Having been raised in a Jewish community, having responded to Jesus' immediate call to follow him, and having presumably spent time following, observing, and reflecting as a disciple on the meaning of Jesus' life, healings, and teachings, Peter makes the remarkable claim that Jesus is the Christ. The narrator tells us:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (Matt. 16:13-17)

This is the foundational claim of the early church ("You are the Christ"), the second and core article of the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds. It signifies a considerable degree of rational reflection by Peter on the meaning of that initial, existential encounter at the seaside. Appropriating the faith through a public confession involves our emotions, our intellect, and our will as a response to the movement of God in our lives.

In my Mennonite theologizing I have insistently called for an imaginative retrieval of confessional, doctrinal, creedal, and dogmatic thinking as a way of structuring our spiritual and historical experience and of grounding our ethics. Two of my books, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* and *The Dogmatic Imagination: Dynamics of Christian Belief*,⁵ deal extensively with this subject. I have argued that confessions, doctrines, creeds, and dogmas are a family of terms and concepts that have much in common: they all have to do with *orthodoxy*, that is, with right beliefs and right thinking about the faith. They make truth claims. They structure faith. They are the grammar or language of faith that we pass on to our children, students, baptismal candidates, and congregants.

Quite understandably, my generation has expressed great suspicion and fear of the language of doctrine in a way that was not true of our parents'

generation. This suspicion and fear was generated by the experience of doctrine as rigid, oppressive, and exclusionary. This, I have argued, is a misuse and misunderstanding of doctrine. Properly understood – the way the early Christian community understood them – doctrines were developmental and dynamic, and were meant to bridge what the community believed and what the new challenges posed. These doctrines are not to be interpreted literalistically and woodenly, but as dynamic metaphors and symbols of ultimacy. The symbols are more than rules regulating human beliefs and behavior (as Lindbeck claims); they help to mediate the divine reality to which they point and to shape moral behavior.

I have been accused of giving the words of the ancient creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, Chalcedon) too much authority. However, I do not interpret the creeds in a literal, plenary infallible, verbally inerrant way. The doctrines constituting the creeds are fallible, human expressions of ineffable divine mysteries. The central mystery to which they point is the reality of the Trinity: the core Christian claim that the one God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles has manifested himself in three ways: as transcendent creator of the world (Father), as historic redeemer of the world (Son), and as dynamic reconciler of all things (Spirit). While male imagery has traditionally dominated Trinitarian discussions, the essence and manifestation of the one God in three persons transcends male and female gender. If these divine images are going to maintain or recover symbolic power for us, they will need to be gender inclusive or genderless. God as three-in-one is the non-negotiable core of the faith, and faith in Jesus as the Christ (fully human and divine) is intrinsic to this threefold view. All other doctrines and beliefs are grounded in this central Trinitarian and Christological claim. This is theology's starting point for all attempts to address the contemporary theological agenda that I outlined earlier.

Theology as Doubt and Denial

However, orthodoxy ought to be understood not univocally but dialectically. Doctrines, creeds, and dogmas are earthly, human, churchly signs of faithfulness to spiritual encounter, personal ethics, and social justice. In order to remain true to the essential realities to which they point, they need to develop over time, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even the neo-

orthodox theologian Karl Barth says, “Dogmatics is the science [discipline] in which the church [. . .] , in accordance with the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its confessions.”⁶ These doctrines include within them both a “Yes” and a “No.” A Yes to divine reality and a No to literal portrayals of that reality. Without this Yes-No character they can become idolatrous, as when we worship human words rather than what they mediate and point to.

This dialectical quality of faith is represented in Peter’s astonishing betrayal and denial of Christ, the fourth moment in Peter’s career. Peter had been raised in a nurturing, believing community, had left his nets to follow Jesus, and had personally confessed Jesus as the Christ. Now, at the critical moment of Jesus’ crucifixion, he fails the ultimate test. In effect, he apostacizes. As earlier he had publicly confessed Christ, he now publicly denies him. As earlier he sank in doubt when over-confidently going to meet Jesus on the water (Matt. 14:22-33); he now at the end openly denies that he had ever known Jesus.

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; . . .” Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples. . . . (Matt. 26:31-35)

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” Again he denied with an oath, “I do not know the man.” After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath. “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock

crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly. (Matt. 26:69-75)

For me, the high point of Bach’s magnificent *Saint Matthew Passion* is the dramatic portrayal of Peter’s denial, ending with the recitative “Und ging heraus und weinete bitterlich” (Then he went out and wept bitterly), which is followed by the moving alto aria, “Have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, my God, let Thou my tears persuade Thee.” This is succeeded by the chorale: “Tho’ from Thee temptation lured me, Lord, to Thee I come again. Thy forgiveness is assured me through Thy Son’s despair and pain. I do not deny my guilt, but Thy mercy, if Thou wilt, far exceedeth my transgression, of which I must make confession.”

Tillich has made the provocative claim that doubt – and, I would add, rejection – is not the opposite of faith but is in fact included within faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt but absolute certainty. The Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith, he says, covers not only our sin but our doubt and betrayal as well. One might say there is in profound Christian faith itself an “atheistic” moment, an element of doubt, denial, and even rejection. Jesus himself must have experienced some of this on the cross when he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). In his prison cell, Bonhoeffer, like Luther and Hegel before him, experienced this when he talked about the weakness and death of God on the cross. I think it was Bonhoeffer who at one point proclaims that “the curses of the atheist may be more pleasing to the ears of God than the hallelujahs of the pious.” The short-lived, so-called “Death of God” movement of the 1960s made agnosticism a key tenet of its theology: God has died, proponents said. Friedrich Nietzsche too lamented the death of God. We have killed God, he said in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The problem with this theological movement was that it considered this death of God a permanent state and not a moment in the life of humanity (if not God himself) followed by the resurrection.

I propose that we see the story of Peter and his denial as representing the experience of the Western church since the Enlightenment. A good segment of the church lost its way. It was so enamoured of the thought of the great masters of suspicion – Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx,

Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud – not to mention the historical critique of the Bible and the tradition, that it lost its biblical and classical heritage. Yet the Enlighteners forced the church to ask important questions about itself and its dogmas. Somewhere along the way, the church's dogmas became petrified with humans worshiping the Bible, the dogmas, and human rituals rather than the living God who encounters us. The church owes the Enlightenment a great debt of gratitude, not only for its critique of religious idolatry but for its emancipatory impulses, as expressed in various liberation movements, including feminism and womanism. Any denunciation of the Enlightenment by postmodern critics dare not overlook these positive contributions.

Theology as Systematic Thought

One need not specialize in theology to do theology. All Christians, young and old, are engaged on some level in theological reflection. Something about the Christian faith drives the believer to give an account of the faith and to ask ever deeper questions about the nature, meaning, and truth of the claims being made, the relation of different elements of faith to each other, and the application of the faith to all aspects of life and the world. Early Anabaptists, faced with persecution and martyrdom, frequently quoted 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands of you an accounting of the hope that is within you." This accounting is not a fideistic (blind faith) defense of the faith; rather it involves the heart, soul, and mind.

In what I call the fifth moment of his career, Peter in his second sermon as recorded in Acts 2 manifests a remarkable level of systematic analysis, even though he and his fellow Apostles are described by the narrator as "uneducated and ordinary men." In his sermon he explores the meaning of recent events in the context of Old Testament theology and expectations, and the demands they make on the hearers:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them

were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. . . .

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them. . . . “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. . . .

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. . . . Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins be forgiven; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:1-38)

Recounting the Christ-events in the light of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, Peter’s sermon includes the basic elements of the *kerygma* (the message, the “rule of faith”) that would later be formulated systematically in the creeds: the foreknowledge of God; Jesus’ crucifixion; his abandonment to Hades; his resurrection; his ascension to the right hand of God; the call to repentance; the forgiveness of sins; and the gift of the

Holy Spirit (2:14-36). Peter gives a highly systematic interpretation of all the events leading up to Christ's death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Particularly striking is the Trinitarian theology implicit in the sermon: "This *Jesus* God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right of *God*, and having received from the *Father* the promise of the *Holy Spirit*, he has poured out this that you both see and hear" (2:32-33).

The fully-fledged doctrine of the Trinity as it developed later in the fourth century, both in the Eastern and the Western church, was but a theological working out of the claims made in the New Testament. Theologians and the church began articulating more clearly the unity and distinctions between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit in light of Jewish monotheism. The early Christians and church theologians recognized these three as distinct realities within one divine unity; they never sacrificed monotheism in favor of polytheism. As noted earlier, I have made in my own work the teaching of God as Three in One, One in Three the core doctrine around which all other tenets of our faith are organized. This point is particularly important today as we dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and others.

Theology and Other Religions

An aspect of modern and postmodern existence is *pluralism*: within a given society diverse religious and non-religious communities co-exist within the same territorial space, frequently with conflicting ideologies and beliefs. The question this raises for both political thought and religious belief is how to live with "the other" peacefully. Although this situation represents a shift from the time of Christendom (the medieval period when one could assume a Christian hegemony in society), pluralism is not alien to the context of the Bible and the early church. Pre-fourth century Greco-Roman society was defined by just such religious pluralism and diversity based on polytheism. It is in light of this background that Peter's dramatic vision of the sheet coming down from heaven should be interpreted. This is the sixth moment in Peter's move from existential faith encounter to systematic theological reflection, and to mission.

Acts 10 recounts how the early Jewish-Christians, here represented by Peter, begin engaging non-Jews, in this particular case a member of the

pagan military. Cornelius is a centurion of the Italian Cohort, in charge of 100 soldiers of the Roman army. We are told that he, with his whole household, was an upright, devout, and godly man. This sympathetic portrayal of a Roman military man must have been provocative for Jews at the time, and should give Mennonite purists pause as well. One afternoon Cornelius has a vision in which the angel of God appears to him, and assures him that his prayers and alms have been received by the Lord. He is ordered to go to Joppa to meet with Simon Peter. It is noteworthy that he sent “two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him” (10:5-7) in the military, to Joppa in order to find Peter.

While these men are on their journey, Peter also has a vision. He was on the rooftop of his house, hungry, when he saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. On it were all kinds of creatures considered unclean by Jews. Peter heard a voice telling him to eat, but he refused, saying, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (10:14). This happened three times and then the sheet disappeared. While Peter was still reflecting on the vision, Cornelius’s three representatives appeared. The end result is that Peter and some fellow believers accompany the men back to Caesarea to meet Cornelius. Peter addresses Cornelius and the assembly around him with these words: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:28-35). Having said this, Peter launches into the message of Jesus, and while he is still speaking the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles.

We could spin out many themes arising out of these texts, but I want to concentrate on just one, the Christian attitude toward other religions. We are told in no uncertain terms that God shows no partiality among the nations (and we could include religions here). Anyone in any nation – or religion – who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. Critics could, of course, point out that Acts 10 ends with Christ being preached to the Gentiles (and other religions); they received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. In other words, these pagans, with their pagan religiosity, were converted to the one true religion. But I think this is too easy an interpretation.

There is a clear recognition of the authenticity of the piety, devotion, and upright morality of the Centurion and his household prior to any conversion, a religious sincerity that was acceptable to God. Also, at no point in the story are we told that their newfound faith in God demanded that they give up their existing professions.

As many of you know, I have been involved with others at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and Conrad Grebel University College in an exchange program and academic dialogue with Shiite Muslims from Iran. In fact, on April 28, 2008 I will fly to Iran to give a lecture on “Conceptualizing Universal Moral Principles for Social Ethics: The Pros and Cons of Global Ethics” at an Iranian University. I plan to continue the dialogue. What has impressed me about my Iranian Muslim friends is their sincere piety, expressed in faithful prayer; their concern for a moral, upright life; their high regard, even reverence, for Jesus; and their common search with us for a truth that transcends our different understandings. While there are significant differences between Shi-ah Muslims and Mennonite Christians – e.g., they reject the deity of Christ and a Trinitarian understanding of God, and they have a different view of the relation of the religious community to the state – nevertheless we have much to learn from each other. They can learn from us in the area of Jesus’ teachings of love, peace, and nonviolence; we can learn from their emphasis on prayer and mystical spirituality. Each drives the other to a deeper understanding of their own religious traditions. There comes a point, however, where we witness to each other about our own understanding and experience of truth, and pray that the Holy Spirit will appear upon us mutually.

Theology as Doxology

Finally, seventh, theology is doxology – the praise and worship of God. Dialogue with others of different religious convictions can be true encounter only if one is firmly grounded in one’s own conviction. So far I have made little mention of ethics. Surely, Mennonite theology, if it is anything, is ethics: the love of neighbor as oneself. Let me draw our attention again to the great answer of Jesus to the question of which is the greatest commandment: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love

your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

With Barth I want to propose that all Christian ethics be seen as a sub-category of the love and praise of God. According to Barth, “The ‘second’ commandment has no other meaning and content apart from and in addition to: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.’”⁷ Our morality and ethics are not a means to salvation but forms of worship, thanksgiving, and praise to God.

I am working on a book on Christian social ethics, tentatively entitled “A Positive Theology of Law, Order, and Civil Society.” In it I explore what a political theology from a Mennonite perspective might look like, and pick up themes from my earlier work on German political theology in the Nazi period⁸ and on Marxist-Christian dialogue in the former Yugoslavia.⁹ This volume will be a sequel to my *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, in which I argue that all Christian ethics must have dogmatic/doctrinal foundations, especially the doctrine of the Trinity, if it is not to be reduced to human action pure and simple. What I have not stressed sufficiently up to now is how all Christian ethics is rooted in Christian spirituality, particularly the life, worship, prayer, and liturgy of the church. Both ethics and the creeds become lifeless if they are not grounded in doxology. (Two fine recent articles authored by friends of mine have brought this to my attention: Peter Erb’s “The Creed, Doctrine, and the Liturgical Occasion: Continuing a Conversation with A. James Reimer;”¹⁰ and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan’s “The Church’s Worship and the Moral Life: An Anglican Contribution to Trinitarian Ethics.”¹¹)

The seventh moment in my account of the Apostle Peter concerns precisely theology and the church’s life of prayer, liturgy, and worship. Theology as an academic or ethical discipline that is sundered from a living community of worshiping believers betrays its historic tradition and role. Mennonites in their concern for discipleship and nonviolent action in the world have not given sufficient attention to the church’s liturgical and worshiping life as the ground and context for the politics of Jesus.

When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, Jesus replied: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matt.16:18). This critical verse has been interpreted in at least two different ways. Roman Catholics have understood the church to be founded on Peter as the first bishop (vicar of

Christ) in the long continuous apostolic tradition. Protestants have interpreted the rock to be not Peter himself but his confession: “You are the Christ.” These two views can be combined to say that the Christian community is founded on *both* the Apostle Peter *and* his confession. Peter represents the *apostles* and the historical church community, and his confession represents the apostolic *message*. When people are called to faith, confession, witness, defence, and ethical obedience, they must see themselves as part of an historical institution much larger and older than their individual lives or even their local congregation or denomination. They are part of the church universal that extends through time and throughout the whole world.

Why not then convert to Roman Catholicism, the universal church *par excellence*? I hope Peter Erb will forgive me for becoming somewhat personal here. He and I both come from semi-rural Anabaptist-Mennonite backgrounds – although from different historical streams (he from Amish, I from Russian-Mennonite). We both have moved from a left-leaning liberal period in our lives to a greater appreciation of the classical conservative tradition. We have both sought to leave behind a sectarian understanding of the church for a universal, catholic one. By “sectarian” I mean a church that is withdrawn into itself and sees itself standing over against others in the larger Christian body.

Yet Erb has decided to convert, and I have chosen to stay within the Mennonite fold. I have high regard for his personal and spiritual integrity, and respect his decision to join Roman Catholicism. He has important, persuasive theological and ecclesiological reasons for doing so. But I have decided that I can contribute to ecumenical dialogue in my own way by remaining in my own theological tradition. (I spell out my reasons for remaining a Mennonite in an article, “A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation: A Personal Tribute [to Peter Erb]” soon to be published in a *Festschrift* in his honor.)¹² No one tradition has the total truth or all the gifts of the spirit. We need each other and each other’s gifts for a truly ecumenical and universal Christian understanding of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

What is at stake for Christian theology today is clarity about our basic Christian convictions. I have used the story of the Apostle Peter, the seven

moments in his career, as a way to identify the underlying assumptions by which to guide our addressing the major issues that face us as individuals and as the church.

I began, first, with situating theological work in communities of nurture and character formation. Theological reflection does not begin *ex nihilo*. We don't start from a clean slate. Second, theological thinking is first and foremost a response to and reflection upon an encounter with a living God who grasps and addresses us. Without this, all our theologizing is only a form of human wish fulfillment and self-projection. Third, theology without dogmatic structure and form, without a confessional grammar of faith, becomes pure irrational dynamism at the mercy of demonic powers. Fourth, such structured orthodoxy is to be seen dialectically, having within it both a "Yes" and a "No," an affirmation of faith and a sceptical, agnostic and "atheistic" moment without which it becomes idolatrous. Fifth, only in being aware of the precariousness of one's faith and the danger of idolatry can systematic theological thinking about God and all things in relation to God proceed. Sixth, the systematic task is not a self-enclosed, ivory tower enterprise but one that is open to the challenge and critique of "the other," including "the religious other." Finally, seventh, all theology and ethics is ultimately doxology – a reverence before the awesome mystery of God expressed in pious personal devotion and the prayerful public worship of a believing community.

Notes

All Biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

¹ Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004).

² Brochure for A. James Reimer Award at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre.

³ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁵ A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001) and *The Dogmatic Imagination: Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Kitchener/Scottsdale: Herald Press (2003).

⁶ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 9.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 401.

⁸ A. James Reimer, *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: The Political Ramifications of Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

⁹ A. James Reimer, *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

¹⁰ In Jeremy Bergen, Paul G. Doerksen, and Karl Koop, eds., *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honor of A. James Reimer* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 181-96. Reviewed in this issue of CGR. -- Editor

¹¹ In *Creed and Conscience*, 197-218.

¹² A James Reimer, "A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation: A Personal Tribute," in Michael Desjardins and Harold Remus, eds., *Tradition and Formation: Claiming an Inheritance. Essays in Honour of Peter C. Erb* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2008).

About the 2008 Benjamin Eby Lecturer

A. James Reimer retired in 2008 from Conrad Grebel University College, where he was a professor of Religion and Theology. Recently, he was awarded Distinguished Professor Emeritus status by the University of Waterloo. For many years he also served as Professor of Theology at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), and Director and Academic Advisor of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, focused on graduate level theological education, teaching, research, and ecumenical conversation at TST.

He specializes in modern European intellectual history and modern theology. He has conducted extensive research on German theology in the 1920s and 1930s; modern theology and technology, particularly in relation to the thought of George P. Grant; theology and critical social theory; political ethics; and Mennonite systematic theology.

Reimer is the author of *Paul Tillich: Theologian of Nature, Culture and Politics* (LIT Verlag, 2004), *The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Herald Press, 2003), *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Pandora Press, 2001), and *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: The Political Ramifications of Theology* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); and he is the editor of *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology: Critical Theory and the Future of Religion* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992). He is currently working on political theology, law, and civil institutions; and on a book, *Christians and War*, for Fortress Press.

Reimer received an MA (History) from the University of Toronto in 1974, and a PhD (Theology) from the University of St. Michael's College in 1983. As of 2002, he is a life time member of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey.

About the Benjamin Eby Lectureship

Benjamin Eby (1785-1853) typified, and possibly inaugurated, Mennonite culture in Upper Canada. He and his wife Mary arrived in Waterloo County from Pennsylvania in 1807. By 1812 he was ordained bishop, and in 1815 he was overseeing construction of the area's first schoolhouse. Eby provided outstanding leadership in the church and in education throughout his life. The Benjamin Eby Lectureship, named in his honor and established at Conrad Grebel University College in the 1980s, offers faculty members an opportunity to share research and reflections with the broader College and University community.

Baptismal Robes or Camel's Hair? A Theological Response to the "Politics of Becoming"

Anthony G. Siegrist

An odd perception about Anabaptists – and Mennonites in particular – is that they have traditionally lacked both insight and interest in politics. Often pejoratively labeled “sectarian,” Anabaptists themselves have regrettably failed to understand the political significance of their beliefs and practices. They have too easily bought into the notion that politics, or the structure of the relationships of institutions and communities, is the concern of the nation state, and they have allowed a false dichotomy between faith and modern society’s notion of the “public square” to align itself with an equally problematic dichotomy that labels religion *spiritual* and politics *carnal*.

It is now becoming clear that this perception is at best a caricature. Anabaptist beliefs and practices have always had political implications and have always said something fairly profound about the world of politics. Most obviously this is seen in the practice of pacifism. But what is it that prevents the political impact of Anabaptism from reaching beyond the established horizon of pacifism in either its non-resistant or activist forms? While I in no way want to challenge the appropriateness of pacifism for Anabaptists, I hope to begin the exploration of how another central doctrine and practice of the Anabaptist community might help to develop a fuller theology of politics.¹

The doctrine and practice that I will explore here is believer’s baptism. The centrality of this doctrine to the Anabaptist tradition is obvious; basic etymology demonstrates this easily enough. To develop an engagement of this sort, the logical first step would be to define “believer’s baptism.” At the risk of frustrating the philosophers among us, I will put this step on hold and instead construct the definition as the essay progresses, for in this case it is certainly true that everything is won or lost in definition. Therefore, the initial question for me is not how we might understand baptism, but what sort of politics we might ask the practice of believer’s baptism to engage.

I have no doubt that the doctrine of Christian baptism carries the potential to cut at the roots of the current populist American incarnation of

Constantinianism, but what I want to explore here is to what extent believer's baptism helps Anabaptists respond to a slightly more sophisticated form of thought, namely the self-proclaimed postmodern political thinking of William E. Connolly.

I will begin by outlining Connolly's "politics of becoming," an integral part of his larger political thought and the heart of his answer to the chief problem vexing many political philosophers today, namely exclusion. I focus on Connolly not because he is particularly well-known but because the portion of his thought related here represents a feasible left-of-center response to the political phenomena of secularism, pluralism, and exclusion. I believe that many of us have a take on politics and ethics similar either to Connolly's or to the type of modernist secularism that he rejects.

The second part of this article is a theological response to the political impulse represented by Connolly. To construct this initial response I will look to Karl Barth's description of believer's baptism from Volume IV/4 of his *Church Dogmatics*. Along the way I will also briefly interact with several contemporary voices congenial to Anabaptism.²

Connolly's Prophetic Agenda

William E. Connolly is an American political philosopher currently making his academic home at Johns Hopkins University. I will refer here mostly to his book *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999). The goal of his work is to refashion secularism by moving it beyond its current conceits.³ Like all those concerned with social ethics or suffering, Connolly has a strong prophetic bent, and he all but dons the tangled beard, leather belt, and wild-eyed stare of the prophet when he prods his audience toward action.

Connolly proposes that a form of pluralism appropriate to our contemporary age of globalization will *not* likely come from a political philosophy that pretends to sit outside the parameters of metaphysically-bound perspectives. Instead, what needs to happen is for the doctrine of secularism to be rewritten "to pursue an ethos of engagement in public life among a plurality of controversial *metaphysical* perspectives, including, for starters, Christian and other monotheistic perspectives, secular thought, and asecular, nontheistic perspectives."⁴ Connolly is interested in exploring a "nontheistic postsecular ethic" that "situates itself within the experience of

the constitutive *indispensibility and fragility of ethics*.”⁵ In other words, he wants to make ethics and political philosophy messy and complicated again – to take secularism’s attempted end-run back to the drawing board.

Connolly reminds us that for all its attempts at pure logic and emotional detachment, politics often leans more heavily on visceral reactions than we would like to admit. He is in tune with the very human sense that our selves are too flimsy to remain whole in a world constantly reminding us that we are not doing enough – a world that overwhelms us with its never-ending pressure to raise our awareness of the suffering of both the other and ourselves.

It is extremely probable that all of us are unattuned today to some modes of suffering and exclusion that will become ethically important tomorrow as a political movement carries them across the threshold of cultural attentiveness and institutional redefinition. This is so because each effective movement of difference toward a new, legitimate cultural identity breaks a constituent in its previous composition that located it below the operational reach of personhood and justice by rendering it immoral, inferior, hysterical, sinful, incapacitated, unnatural, abnormal, irresponsible, monomaniacal, narcissistic, nihilistic, or sick.⁶

In the struggle to mitigate the powers of exclusion and to lessen the suffering of those whose identities render them marginalized, our society often places the burden of realizing the good upon the sometimes broad shoulders of justice. Connolly’s statement above alerts us to the reality that justice in itself cannot move us beyond the reality that some modes of suffering simply go unnoticed, because their very nature disqualifies the sufferer from the basic sanctity of personhood.⁷ Justice, then, is essentially an ambiguous practice, for it is only after a movement crosses the “threshold of cultural attentiveness” that the mode of suffering fits into the categories in which justice operates. “Failure by many secular theorists to acknowledge this fundamental ambiguity at the center of justice disables them from registering the importance of an ethos of responsiveness to justice itself.”⁸

It is not surprising that Western society has been forced to supplement justice with a value such as tolerance. But tolerance, for Connolly, “implies benevolence toward others amid stability of ourselves. . . .”⁹ It is the attachment to the stability of the self that Connolly suggests his readers

must move beyond. The modern attachment to the self and to the nation can in the end do nothing but limit others and make their suffering secondary to the preservation of our own selves. Instead of the static morality of justice under the umbrella of secularism, we must cultivate politics that recognizes things are mobile at bottom. Cultivating “the politics of becoming” means that we consider our own selves to be under (de)construction, and remember that the form of justice now taken as self-evident was once progressive and threatening, causing a type of suffering to those whose identities were deconstructed in the evolution of justice. When we have arrived, either as individuals or as a society, we unavoidably position ourselves as the weight holding in place the walls, ceilings, and fences that keep others from realizing their full personhood.

While uninterested in metaphysics, Connolly is concerned with newness, openness, responsiveness, and self-artistry – that is, one’s ability to remake one’s identity to accommodate the other. The politics of becoming is a “paradoxical politics by which new cultural identities are formed out of unexpected energies and institutionally congealed injuries.”¹⁰ Although such politics is attentive to exclusion and other varieties of suffering, it implicitly questions the possibility of getting beyond such realities.¹¹ Connolly’s politics assumes that suffering, like pain itself, will never leave us. If “each positive identity is organized through the differences it demarcates . . . then the politics of becoming often imperils the comforts through which dominant constituencies are reassured.”¹² In this light, the question is not whether we are for or against suffering but rather “which sort of suffering is most worthy of responsiveness at a particular historical moment, that which the politics of becoming imposes on the stability of being or that which established identities impose upon the movement of differences in order to protect their stability.”¹³ The best that politics such as Connolly’s can do – its obvious prophetic nature notwithstanding – is to “reposition selected modes of suffering so that they move from an obscure subsistence or marked identity *below* the register of justice to a visible, unmarked place *on it*.”¹⁴

A Theological Response

The political and ethical upshot of Connolly’s proposal is that we must be careful to remain responsive to the other, and not – because the other

appears “immoral, inferior, hysterical, sinful, incapacitated, unnatural, abnormal, irresponsible, monomaniacal, narcissistic, nihilistic, or sick” – deprive them of the protection of personhood and justice.¹⁵ The only way to do this is to allow our own identities to remain undefined, amorphous, open, and always changing – constantly becoming. This is, at the least, a little threatening. It reverberates in the wilderness of contemporary politics like a call to prepare the way for something yet to come, or perhaps for someone whose sandals we are not worthy to untie. But for Connolly there is nothing coming. The revelation that such a politics begs for cannot be detected even as a bump on the social horizon. This unpleasant jolt of reality aside, Connolly is helpful. He appropriately chastens the modern myth that secularization and secularism might save us from our religious bigotry.¹⁶ He also moves us toward a politics of humble responsiveness in a way many theistic perspectives fail to do.

As stated earlier, I believe Anabaptism retains rich political resources within its traditional practices. In what follows I will examine believer's baptism as such a resource. My intention in doing so against the above backdrop is not to allow one person's take on the modern world to set the agenda for theology; instead, I hope to demonstrate the critical edge with which certain Anabaptist practices anchored firmly in the rich soil of Christian doctrine are capable of engaging our world.

Barth's Doctrine of Baptism as a Response to the Politics of Becoming

Karl Barth vexed many of his admirers when he declared himself in favor of believer's baptism. For Barth, baptism is a response to God's action in which Christians declare that their lives are lived for God. In the same way he says that “baptism, as the beginning of a life in living hope, is *per use* a definitive assignment of Christians to the service of [others]”¹⁷ Baptism is neither the beginning nor the end of a human's relationship to God, but a transitional event marking the first step of a life lived in Christ and setting the trajectory for that life.¹⁸

The practice of baptism is not set loose in the midst of the church unconnected to God's freedom and goodness. Since Christian baptism is commanded by God, and since its goal is reconciliation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, it is grounded in God's initiation; it is a response

to Divine action.¹⁹ “Baptism responds to a mystery, the sacrament of the history of Jesus Christ, of His resurrection, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit but is not itself, however, a mystery or sacrament.”²⁰

Barth’s language contrasts with that of two important Anabaptist theologians. Both John Howard Yoder, whose pervasive influence over contemporary Anabaptist theology and ethics is undeniable, and Thomas N. Finger are comfortable using sacramental language to describe baptism.²¹ While Yoder and Finger are both fairly nuanced on this point, I am less optimistic than either of them that the word “sacrament” can be retrieved from the abuses of the past. Therefore, it is appropriate to move, with Barth, away from the terminology of sacrament and not saddle ourselves with the baggage of other traditions that face the continual problem of differentiating their view of the sacraments from those that are simply magical or mechanistic ways of laying hold of God’s grace. Barth’s caution should advise even Anabaptists with roots in the Zwinglian tradition against overcompensating through a return to a theology of sacraments. Baptism, like the rest of the church’s Jesus-ordained practices, is not the spiritual ingestion of so many “grace vitamins.”

It is time for Anabaptists, with Yoder and Finger, to move beyond the memorialist view of baptism common in Baptist circles but, with Barth, to stop short of re-establishing baptism as a sacrament. This middle course avoids the pitfalls of both extremes, which fail to recognize God’s action in the sociality of the church. With some good judgment, this can be done even as Anabaptists continue to re-engage the classic Christian tradition in new, exciting ways. Again, listening to Barth is fruitful here, for in his view baptism is human action embodying an acknowledgment of the work of God in Christ, who is the true sacrament, and it must “bear witness to it, to confess it, to respond to it, to honor, praise and magnify it.”²²

In this initial description of baptism we can already see how this practice sets itself up against Connolly’s politics. Connolly respects reverence but does not, to put it flatly, believe that God exists. Part of the Anabaptist practice of baptism is a statement of finitude; it is an acknowledgment that God exists and acts, and that we do not speak of God merely by speaking about ourselves in a raised voice. Christian baptism then lends witness to the reality that neither ethics nor politics can be other than a response to God’s

action. In baptism Christians confess that in Christ is the only power that can save us; our own actions – regardless of whether they involve military strength, modern conceptions of justice, or democratic decision making – are insufficient to save us from our own destructive impulses.²³ Baptism also frames the rest of the Christian's actions specifically as a response to God's action. This is in marked contrast to actions prompted, albeit with the best intentions, by various forms of suffering or exclusion.

The point of the argument at this juncture is that virtuous behavior, i.e., caring for the poor, speaking for the voiceless, or protesting violence, if *not* done as a response to the call of God, ultimately flounders directionless in the sea of awareness and activism. Yet the argument cuts both ways: just as with the debate over the sacramentality of baptism, traditional responses, those often found at each end of the spectrum, are in the end far too limited. They fail to provide the proper space for *becoming*, as they close off the self and hold the suffering other outside the reach of justice.

Barth asserts that if baptism is a human response to God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ it can be understood as a free act.²⁴ For baptism to retain meaning, it cannot be done under compulsion; rather, it must be an act chosen by both the one being baptized and the church community.²⁵ Since baptism is the beginning of a life of faithfulness to God, it cannot be cloaked in coercion, for that undercuts the act of obedience: "Obedience to God can only be free obedience."²⁶ The freedom of the act of baptism parallels the sanctifying and redeeming work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. While baptism is chosen by an individual, it must never be severed from the work of God. Barth is aware that as a human action baptism is inherently tenuous and possibly even presumptuous. Who can know what such a commitment may eventually demand? Who can presume the ability to be faithful? Barth is careful to affirm that God underwrites the event. It is God's faithfulness and God's goodness that assure the propriety of baptism. Yet human action is not overwhelmed by God's action; Barth insists that human partnership must be taken seriously.²⁷

In this way baptism affirms Connolly's idea that human beings cannot on their own ever reach a frozen state of true being. The commingling of human and divine action in believer's baptism affirms the contingent nature of humans; it affirms that a static individual identity held apart from the

power of Christ, which holds the very world together, is at best perilous. Believer's baptism affirms the connection of grace and the human will. As a Christian practice, it demands that we look beyond the obvious elements of socialization to the importance of the human decision being made.

For Barth, baptism is a way of stepping into God's promise. The Holy Spirit is a foretaste of the coming full reign of Christ.²⁸ In placing their hope in what is beyond themselves, those who are baptized recognize they are no longer bound by their own human weakness. They look not just to the past, where the sacrament of Christ took place in history, but also into the future, which they can enter confidently.²⁹ Although such joy might rub off on a Nietzschean such as Connolly, true Christian hope in Christ is distinct from the optimism of modern or postmodern politics. Christian hope admits there is no salvation in the separation of church and state, the democratic process, western freedom, capitalism, or even human rights. But it does confess that there is a hope; as the Christian dies and is raised to new life in Christ, the reality enacted in baptism, she confesses that her identity now rests in something outside what is contingent and mobile.

Baptism is a paradigmatic practice signaling the individual's place in both the church and the world. "At its very beginning [in baptism] ... the Christian life, without detriment to its individual particularity, is a participation in the life of the Christian community," says Barth. "Baptism involves both the one who baptizes and the one who is baptized."³⁰ It is an act of the church, and in it the individual and the community confess together that Christ has done what they could not do.³¹ Baptism is a reminder and a re-commitment for the whole community; it is a means of conversion for all involved and thus is unavoidably political.³² The church is an active participant in the practice, and in being baptized the individual makes a political statement in identifying himself with this community. In this statement he relativizes his commitment to other institutions and binds himself to the church, confessing at once the determinative nature of the community's norms and his intention to walk with the community in the practice of faithful discernment. In joining such a community the individual confesses that there is a higher good than that of openness, self-artistry, or self-determination, and that being bound and other-determined also has its place.

The commitment that the baptized individual makes to the Christian community is one of the major differences Barth sees between this baptism and that of John the Baptist. Christian baptism has a gathering and uniting character that John's lacked.³³ While John's baptism enacted repentance, Christian baptism also serves as a marker for the individual's entrance into the Christian community. It is thus no coincidence that Barth reminds readers that in the New Testament baptism is usually followed by table fellowship.³⁴ "Baptism, if well done, is done in serious responsibility to the question whether the community and the candidate are together on this narrow way on which obedience is freedom and freedom is obedience."³⁵

Practical Outcomes of a Theology of Baptism

We can now fill in the picture sketched earlier of the practical outcomes of this description of baptism. Dan Rhodes, in his essay "All Sexed Up: Is There a Way Out of Chastity, Marriage, and the Christian Sex Cult?" shows what working out such a theology of baptism might look like. His essay is not about baptism, it is about sex – the current Christian obsession with sex, to be specific. He observes that the church in the West has for all practical purposes mirrored its surrounding culture's obsession with sexuality, and explores how this has come to pass. What is most interesting for our purposes is his conclusion. While Rhodes does offer helpful propositions for getting beyond both the current sexuality debates and the obsession lying behind them, he says more generally that the church should be formed more "by martyrdom than by virginity or family programs. That is, we need more people taking lines of action that correlate with the resurrection and working toward friendship, not securing themselves in marriage or continence. In doing so, [...] we may initiate a revolution of Christianity away from the contemporary sex cult and toward configurations of sainthood born through the fires of martyrdom."³⁶

Rhodes's essay should remind Anabaptists – all Christians, for that matter – that by finding their identity as members of the developing community of Christ-followers they will find a new horizon opening up of possible responses to issues previously demanding a choice between perceived justice and perceived holiness, or, in the terms of our engagement with Barth, a horizon where freedom and obedience meet.

Like John the Baptist, William Connolly calls his audience to repentance. In his own way, Connolly offers baptism into a new way of life, a way of openness and of self-surrender. However, the baptism of John is not Christian baptism. Barth reminds us that after Christ we no longer wear camel's hair or eat locusts.³⁷ Believer's baptism, then, while hearing the call of prophets like John and of political philosophers like Connolly, cannot rest in undefined anticipation, for it must realize the world-changing character of the Incarnation and of the church that is God's new creation. Christian baptism points to the kingdom of God, while a politics of becoming is hardly certain it should point anywhere.

Those who have confessed Christ in their baptism are bound together with their sisters and brothers as a witnessing community. Baptism must launch the individual and the community forward into witness or it is not Christian baptism.³⁸ It ushers the candidate not only into the benefits of the Christian faith but into the responsibility of the church, which always bears political content. This is at times a cross to be borne, but it need not be a totally dour task, for baptism is connected to the promise of God that makes Christian witness a proclamation of hope.³⁹ This proclamation must be not only for the world as such but for the church as it might be or ought to be. It is strange that one of the most overlooked marks of the Christian community's disunity is its lack of ethical acumen. The problem here is not simply that Christians stand on all sides of most ethical issues – killing each other in wars is the extreme case – but that they seem relatively unconcerned that ethical unity is no longer a priority. Christian divisions, including those over ethics, have now become accepted as normal, to the extent that talk of a Christian “Right” and “Left” no longer disturbs us.

For Anabaptists, rediscovering a witness of hope that moves beyond the traditional conservative/liberal division might mean trying something as radical as John D. Roth's suggestion that we abstain for a time from partisan politics.⁴⁰ While Roth's proposal sounds especially strange in a Canadian context, it does not appear that business as usual has healed any of the rifts between factions of the Anabaptist community in the United States, not to mention those within the Christian community at large. In my view, such an abstention lines up with the trajectory on which Barth is taking us when he asserts that the Christian community – the community of the baptized –

lives “not with reference to themselves and their own profit or salvation, but in this proleptic and prophetic ministry of making known to the world, to those who are still outside, that which is given to those inside in the form of knowledge which is provisional and yet which is genuine and certain....”⁴¹

Adult baptism emphasizes the unity of the church, but it also points to the fact that both the converted and the unconverted are unified in their need for Divine grace.⁴² Christ is the hope of both. Barth’s theology of baptism reminds us that those in the church are not different from others in any qualitative or exclusive way. Indeed, humanity’s ever-present need for God’s grace prompts those who confess Christ to embrace those who, according to society’s threshold of attentiveness, are not even fully human, for believers themselves are, but for Christ, not fully human. The politics of becoming has nothing to bear witness to, other than openness; it lacks a teleological trajectory – unless a visceral reaction to suffering is counted as such. Christian baptism implies that there is something – actually someone – to which it can witness with the confidence that this One will enable the realization of one’s true self in Christ.

Conclusion

Believer’s baptism, if it is Christian baptism, demonstrates a distinct politics from both modern secularism and Connolly’s postmodern glorification of becoming. Although Connolly places himself on the left of the political spectrum, the same sort of exercise could have been done with a political philosopher on the right or in the center. But what, if anything, is new here? The parallels between the approach to baptism advocated in this article and the theology of John Howard Yoder expressed in his *Body Politics* are significant.⁴³ Indeed, the outlook presented here leans heavily on Yoder’s work. It should be noted, though, that Mark Thiessen Nation in *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* says that he would have liked to see Yoder read more political philosophy.⁴⁴ Nation’s comment suggests that extending Yoder’s project into the realm of political philosophy has been largely left to others. Might not an Anabaptist political witness have much to learn from some contemporary political philosophy?

In my view Yoder’s *Body Politics*, though a wonderfully stimulating series of insights on baptism and other Christian practices, falls short of

putting these practices in dialogue with political philosophy. Indeed, that was not Yoder's intent. Considering new voices such as Connolly's has the potential to help us not only overcome the temptation to back the bankrupt ideology of secular liberalism but also gain a deeper appreciation for practices important to our own tradition, while discovering layers of meaning that have lain dormant for centuries.

The heart of the matter is not that believer's baptism tells us exactly how to vote, although in certain cases it might, but that it points to a different political economy – not completely different but different enough that we must be vigilant against the temptation to have our imaginations limited by the day-to-day politics of western society. Baptism teaches Christians that our identity lies in Christ and that our action alongside God's is meaningful. If the practice that initiates us into the church demands human agency, then might not the Christian life in general involve concrete acts of response to God's invitation? Baptism reminds us that our actions are to be a response to God's acts, not simply to an apparent human reality such as suffering.

I fear that many Anabaptists of my generation, particularly those with activist leanings, have cut their politics free from the anchoring doctrine of God's freedom and involvement in the world. The temptation is to act without praying or to pray without acting. Neither recognizes the faith statement implicit in the practice of believer's baptism. Baptism teaches that we live toward the good of the kingdom of God and that, bound to the community of believers, our becoming is determined not by the randomness of our own awareness but by the reality of God as revealed in Jesus. At the risk of perpetuating Anabaptist conceit about the early members of the tradition, I suggest that martyrdom is this lesson lived out at a most extreme point. If properly understood, martyrdom shows the openness to the other that is "becoming," yet it undeniably portrays a deeper meaning to life and a view of the good that reaches beyond individuals locating their identity, as it were, in something far stronger than the self. Baptism also teaches that Christians, like everyone else, are dependent upon God's grace, but in standing on this grace our progress as individuals and societies has direction. The role of the church community in the individual's political formation is crucial.

Finally, though, the burden of this article is to show that a political witness which is merely prophetic, lacking in itself a response to Christ, fails

to do justice to the Anabaptist doctrine and practice of baptism. It remains shouting in the desert with John, wearing cloaks of camel's hair and eating locusts, and it does not take on the robes of baptism or share in the Lord's Supper. It fails to account for the world-changing event that is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Notes

¹ My assumption throughout this paper is that *practice* and *doctrine* are not easily separated in an Anabaptist perspective. Therefore, I refer to baptism and pacifism as both doctrines and practices.

² Some readers may notice the conspicuous absence of early Anabaptist voices in this paper. This is an intentional methodological move away from a traditional way of doing Anabaptist theology that assumes the normative or exemplary nature of the movement's founders. It would take an entirely different article to parse this issue with any integrity, and therefore I will simply let it rest.

³ By "secularism" I mean the modern political axiom that relegates religion to the private sphere, while attempting to limit the content of public debate to what is equally apprehensible to all regardless of religious conviction.

⁴ William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 55, emphasis his. Connolly is prompted by Nietzsche to "suggest that you can cultivate an admirable ethical disposition without anchoring it in the commands of a god or reason, and that you are in an excellent position to address affirmatively the politics of becoming when such a disposition is attached to Zarathustra's conviction that there is an ineliminable element of mobility in things at bottom capable of upsetting the best-laid plans at unexpected junctures" (57).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁷ North Americans should be reminded of the difficult journey of American Indians, women, atheists, homosexuals, African Americans, and many others in our history.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹ In this respect a dramatic difference exists between William Connolly and someone like Richard Rorty. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 237.

¹² Connolly, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

¹⁶ We could even go further and, following the work of William Cavanaugh, strengthen this

critique by indicting the modern nation state as a false soteriology. See William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002).

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), 201.

¹⁸ It may seem surprising that I have chosen Karl Barth to describe believer's baptism. Surely there are traditional Anabaptist theologians capable of describing it with the necessary detail for my project. That is true to an extent; however, I have found few modern Anabaptist theologians writing in English, with the possible exception of James McClendon, who have written on believer's baptism with the necessary specificity and depth. Most Anabaptist-Mennonite treatments of baptism are pastoral and, while helpful, lack a certain theological depth. However, I may have overlooked some important sources. If so, I welcome correction. Barth's theology, given his difficult political context and the sheer depth of his analysis, carries a gravity and carefulness that I have found in few traditional Anabaptist theologians.

¹⁹ Barth, 72.

²⁰ Ibid., 102.

²¹ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), 33, 44; Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology, Vol. II* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1989), 331-51; also see Finger's 2006 essay "Sacramentality," available at <http://www.bridgefolk.net/mctc06v/finger.htm>.

²² Barth, 72.

²³ In a related point Barth clearly says that baptism into anything other than Christ is not Christian baptism. Barth wants to chasten those who would mislabel this rite of the church as baptism into freedom, liberty, equality, the beautiful, the good etc. (92).

²⁴ James L. Buckley describes Barth's view of the relationship of human and divine action in baptism as "differentiated unity." This phrase properly highlights the relationship of the active agents in baptism. See "Christian Community, Baptism, and Lord's Supper," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 204.

²⁵ Barth, 131-32.

²⁶ Ibid., 132.

²⁷ Ibid., 163.

²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 206ff.

³⁰ Ibid., 131.

³¹ Ibid., 159.

³² Ibid., 138.

³³ Ibid., 72, 82.

³⁴ Ibid. Here Barth references Acts 8:13; 10:48; 16:15,34; 9:19.

³⁵ Ibid., 154.

³⁶ Dan Rhodes, "All Sexed Up: Is There a Way Out of Chastity, Marriage, and the Christian Sex Cult?," *the other journal.com*, found at <http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=226>.

³⁷ Barth, 87.

³⁸ Ibid., 200.

³⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁰ Roth's proposal and variations of it have been presented several places, perhaps most concisely in his address to the MC USA Delegate Assembly in 2005. A transcript of this address is available at <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/NewItems/delegates/Speakinggovernment0705.pdf>.

⁴¹ Barth, 200.

⁴² Ibid., 192.

⁴³ Beyond *Body Politics* see also Yoder's essay "'But We Do See Jesus': The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth" in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 46-62.

⁴⁴ *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 198.

Anthony G. Siegrist is a ThD Student at the Toronto School of Theology, Wycliffe College, and a lecturer in Theology at Prairie College in Three Hills, Alberta.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, Anabaptism, and the Creeds

Andrew P. Klager

Introduction

The ongoing debate¹ about the value of the ecumenical creeds of Christendom from an Anabaptist historical perspective has generated polarizing judgments on their efficacy and function for early Anabaptist leaders and communities. However, few participants have sufficiently taken into account the patristic understanding of these proclamations of Orthodoxy, and of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in particular. Even when this historical frame of reference is addressed, it typically elicits imprecise conclusions on its negative or positive impact on Christian responsibility or unity. By apprising the Anabaptist community of the Eastern, patristic, and therefore the original mindset, expectations, and conditions engendering the formulation of the creeds during the church's first five hundred years, using St. Gregory of Nyssa as a paradigm, I hope to create a framework within which Anabaptist historians and theologians reluctant to abandon the church's living tradition can be informed by the opposing view's equally warranted concern for ethics and nonviolence.

I will try to meet this objective by evaluating the fusion of spirituality and theology in the patristic era and in the East, its process of deterioration in the West, and the emergence of Anabaptist priorities amid the epistemic theological environment of the sixteenth century. Although serious consideration of this subject can be traced back to classic treatments such as that of Roland Bainton, who contended that Anabaptists are "commonly on the left also with regard to . . . [the] creeds"² and Robert Friedmann's endorsement of this designation,³ I will limit my involvement with contemporary Anabaptist concerns to viewpoints expressed during the current decade only, and only minimally after I have dealt with the Eastern, patristic, and 16th-century Anabaptist contexts and issues.⁴

After I describe the historical background, the chronological progression – from (1) the life of Jesus to (2) the observation of this divine life and its confluence with the divine operations of the Father as revealed

in the Hebrew *Tanak*, then to (3) the imitation of and ontological affiliation with this life, and finally to (4) the creedal description of his person⁵ – will begin to gain credibility. All of this transpired concurrent with Christ's earthly ministry or almost immediately upon his ascension, with creedal expressions evolving concomitantly with the emergence of innovative heretical teachings that had to be addressed.

Many portions of the circumscribed and intentionally formulated Rules of Faith were created not for Jesus' followers but for calibrating heterodox misinterpretations in order to preserve a *pre-existing* soteriology that stressed a behavioral and ontological affiliation and union with Christ who is both divine and human.⁶ They did so by using christological and triadological phraseology purposely tailored for *heterodox* convictions that either failed to take the incarnation seriously enough or categorically rejected it. For that reason, such distant descendants of Latin Christianity as the 16th-century Anabaptist leaders felt compelled to propel ethics and the imitation of Christ to the forefront of theological activity, by explicitly addressing ethical behavior⁷ and avowing the necessity of one's transformational or ontological affiliation with the incarnate Christ.

This article contends that the gradual separation of theology and spirituality in the West, not (or less than) the creeds' ostensible silence on the ethico-soteriological implications of the narrative of Jesus,⁸ contributed to 16th-century Anabaptism's emphasis on *Nachfolge* and the illumination of the creeds' soteriological and ethical intimations. I will enlist Eastern Orthodox voices that can guide us to a more thorough and accurate understanding of the purpose and essence of theology as prayer⁹ and as *becoming*,¹⁰ and soteriology as *theosis* or deification.

Indeed, the Eastern view of salvation as *theosis* was not foreign to early Anabaptism. No component or dimension of Eastern Christianity is left untouched by the inexorable assimilation of spirituality and theology, the mutual suffusion between things of heaven and things of earth. This is true of liturgical theology; ecclesiology; the nature of worship and the sacraments; understanding of the scriptures; humanity's mediatory role between heaven and earth, between the uncreated and created realms; the function of icons; the role of tears; the life of a saint; and the apprehension of the person of Christ.¹¹

I will appeal to St. Gregory of Nyssa's¹² theological methodology in light of the creedal formulations to which he significantly contributed.¹³ I will discuss two specific contributions: (1) his "apophasis," which regulates and permits insight into the precise function of theological concepts or images (*epinoia*) and the resulting emphasis on God's operations (*energeia*); and (2) his concern for preserving an Orthodox soteriology as a manifestation of the fusion of spirituality and theology as well as the capacitation and authorization for his theological involvement. Gregory's insights resonate with contemporary Anabaptist scholarship. He will at times agree with current perspectives but will also suggest new ways of participating in what Anabaptists already stress, e.g., discipleship and a soteriology manifesting itself ethically and acknowledging the salience of Jesus' political, socio-economic, and nonviolent measures.

The Historical Sequence and Function of the Creeds

Fr. John Behr seeks to maintain the appropriate sequence of events leading from the life and teachings of the church as canon to the immortalization of this standard in the church's doctrines and creeds. "The tendency is to begin with Nicaea," he says, "and then look for anticipations of Nicene theology in the earlier periods. But, it is methodologically faulty to begin with the results of the controversies"¹⁴ Central to Behr's thesis is the primitive creed formulated in 1 Cor. 15:3-5:

What is most important here is the phrase that the apostle Paul repeats twice: Christ died and rose "in accordance with the scriptures." This phrase is so important that it is preserved in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which is still said at every Orthodox Christian baptism and celebration of the Divine Liturgy: Christ died and rose in accordance with the (same) scriptures. It is important to recognize that the scriptures in question are not the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – they had not even been written when Paul made this statement, but rather what we call the Old Testament – the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets.¹⁵

The circumstance whereby such creedal affirmations existed very early was largely due to the revelation of Christ from the Hebrew *Tanakh* as

exegeted by Christ himself and sustained through the *kerygma* of the apostles and later by the Church Fathers.¹⁶ The authority of Christ was intuited from his person and narrative rather than from a philosophical abstraction of the same.

In isolation from the precise creedal expressions existing during his time, Aristides could affirm Jesus' salvific authority by observing his miracles as described in the biblical narrative.¹⁷ Tertullian deduced from Scripture that an association between God and Jesus is evident from its implicit disclosure in the Sermon on the Mount:

[T]hat he begins with beatitudes, is characteristic of the Creator, who used no other voice than that of blessing either in the first fiat or the final dedication of the universe: for "my heart," says he, "has indicted a very good word." This will be that "very good word" of blessing which is admitted to be the initiating principle of the New Testament, after the example of the Old. What is there, then, to wonder at, if he entered *on his ministry* with the very attributes of the Creator, who ever in language of the same sort loved, consoled, protected, *and* avenged the beggar, and the poor, and the humble, and the widow, and the orphan?¹⁸

Elsewhere Tertullian arrives at the same conclusion by observing Jesus' sinlessness,¹⁹ miracles,²⁰ and transfiguration.²¹ However, despite conceding the capacity for following Jesus through observing in him certain theistic characteristics, all of which Christ's own followers could detect, patristic authors such as Ignatius of Antioch,²² Aristides,²³ Irenaeus,²⁴ Tertullian,²⁵ Clement of Alexandria,²⁶ Hippolytus,²⁷ Origen,²⁸ Gregory Thaumaturgus,²⁹ and Cyprian³⁰ nevertheless did develop Rules of Faith, either for individual or regional use. Yet these creeds were intimately dependent on the "ethico-soteriological" ramifications of Christ's fulfillment of OT precepts and of his earthly existence and humanity's vocation in view of these ramifications. The Rules sought to defend and preserve the ethical obligations of Christians, the life in Christ, and the synergistic requirements of God and humanity for salvation.³¹

However, the particular components of the Rules seemed intent on combating heresies whose syncretistic belief systems threatened this

ethico-soteriological nucleus of Christianity, this life in Christ.³² In fact, because these heresies were syncretistic their exponents could generate ethical standards based on their beliefs – ineluctably subsequent to ideology – rather than formulate beliefs or a creed of their own that would preserve their ethics and perpetuate a pre-established soteriology, as was natural to the continuation of a living Tradition.³³

Unlike the Orthodox situation, heresies could not base their behavior on the historical Jesus, because heretical sects were religious alloys, the products of a union between Christianity and a pagan religious system or philosophy. Patristic authors acknowledged this syncretism: Tertullian recognized the “lateness of date which marks all heresies”³⁴ and insisted they “are themselves instigated by philosophy”³⁵; Hippolytus claimed Noetianism was a product of the philosophy of Heraclitus³⁶ while alleging that “from philosophers the heresiarchs [derived] starting points, [and] like cobblers patching together, according to their own particular interpretation, the blunders of the ancients, have advanced them as novelties to those that are capable of being deceived.”³⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette observes that the various forms of Gnosticism can be traced to “Orphic and Platonic dualism, other schools of Greek thought, Syrian conceptions, Persian dualism, the mystery cults, Mesopotamian astrology, and Egyptian religion.”³⁸ Manichaeism, whose founder was of Persian background, was a mixture of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity.³⁹ Latourette alludes to the origin of elements in Marcion’s heresy by specifying his birthplace at Sinople, “the country of the famous cynic, Diogenes.”⁴⁰ Preserving Christianity’s ethico-soteriological core against the immorality ensuing from heretical systems of belief was the primary goal of the Church Fathers’ patronage of appropriate creedal phraseology. Their formulations modified elements of heterodox conceptions seeking to facilitate debauched behavior⁴¹ while abating access to the divine and threatening the process of *theosis*.⁴²

The Eastern Indissolubility of Spirituality and Theology

The original outlook, retaining the fusion of theology and spirituality, is upheld to this day within the Eastern tradition, while the West has largely abandoned it in favor of a more analytical approach. As John Binns claims, “The word ‘theology’ [...] is a case in point. In the East the theologian

is committed to the experience of God, not to the discussion of God,”⁴³ an observation echoed by John Chrysavgis.⁴⁴ No doubt with free-church sentiments in mind, Peter Bouteneff observes that “Some insist that dogmas get in the way of their relationship with Jesus.”⁴⁵ However, such concerns, usually associated with J. Denny Weaver,⁴⁶ over apparent omissions in the creeds is not foreign to the Orthodox disposition: Jaroslav Pelikan asserts that “Maximus Confessor had observed that even [...] the doctrine that salvation conferred deification had not been included in the creed or formulated by the councils.”⁴⁷

Orthodoxy does not pay mere lip service to retaining the fusion of spirituality and theology, soteriology and doctrine; it is an authentic expression with a deep imprint on the Orthodox conscience. Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow declared, “The Creed does not belong to you unless you have lived it.”⁴⁸ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware affirms that “True theology [...] is always living, a form of ‘hierurgy’ or holy action, something that changes our life and ‘assumes’ us into itself.... [T]heology is not a matter for specialists but a universal vocation; each is called to become of ‘theologian soul.’”⁴⁹ Bouteneff observes that Christianity “does not consist in a series of verifiable and interlocking hypotheses. Nor is it a philosophical system consisting in satisfactory, mutually consistent presuppositions. Our approach has to be different,”⁵⁰ eventually concluding that dogmas must “orient our lives.”⁵¹ This “existential character” of theology is familiar to both the Orthodox and Anabaptist experience.⁵²

What is unique to Orthodox theological inquiry – and what Anabaptists might learn from, adopt as their own, and even bring to its logical conclusion while being mindful of matters of social justice and nonviolence that Orthodoxy has occasionally overlooked – is the indissolubility of theology and spirituality. Vladimir Lossky insists that “spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology, are inseparably linked in the life of the Church.”⁵³ Chrysavgis adds that “Truth is profoundly mystical, never merely intellectual. It is a reality that ultimately cannot be told. It is a knowledge that is translated into love and life,”⁵⁴ and declares that theology uses “the language of silence translated as poetry, as liturgy, as doxology and as life.”⁵⁵ This silence has epistemological implications that require an “entering into” truth. Serge Verhovskoy maintains that “When we speak about knowledge,

we do not speak about abstract theories. True knowledge is a participation in its object. To know God is to be in communion with Him.”⁵⁶ Commenting on John 1:18, Chrysavgis remarks, “This is the foundation of a language that through *apophasis* (or negation) opens up to the silence of *theosis* (or deification).”⁵⁷

“Unlike Gnosticism, in which knowledge for its own sake constitutes the aim of the Gnostic, Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge,” says Lossky. “This ultimate end is union with God or deification, the [*theosis*] of the Greek Fathers.”⁵⁸ This end is also a concern for the ontology of God into which humanity enters and for which Gregory of Nyssa, along with Athanasius, Basil the Great, and Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen), toiled amid the doctrinal uncertainty and tumult of his day.⁵⁹

The bond between theology and spirituality began to evaporate in the West through numerous religious and cultural inducements. Although the shift in theological priorities is highly complicated, some historians, such as Fr. John Meyendorff, locate the separation of spirituality and theology during the era when “Christian theology acquired, in the medieval Western universities, the status of a ‘science,’ to be taught and learned with the use of appropriate scientific methodology.”⁶⁰ Lossky contends the separation occurred earlier, immediately after the 11th-century schism between East and West; the fusion was espoused by both East and West up until roughly 1054 C.E.⁶¹ Latourette identifies hints of the division during the mid- to later patristic era:

Certainly [the Western] part of the Church was not so torn by the theological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries as were the Eastern portions of the Church. This may have been because the Latin mind was less speculative and more practical and ethical than was the Hellenistic mind of the East. It may be significant that the greatest schisms over questions of morals and discipline, the Novatian and Donatist, had their rise in the West, while the main divisions over speculative theology [...] had their birth in the East.⁶²

However, this does not mean the West was more cognizant of ethical issues than the East, but that the West could and did solve ethical disputes

directly and in isolation from conceptual descriptions of Christ and the Trinity. The implications are important. When Christians in the West assimilated the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as their own, they unavoidably acquired its ethical and soteriological implications. The West nevertheless addressed ethically-stimulated schisms without summoning or acknowledging the salvific components inherent in the creeds, thus allowing the Christendom of Roman partisanship to adopt a more lenient ethical stance – as it did in the face of concerns raised by Novatian and Donatus, however heretical these were.⁶³

Onto-behavioral Priorities in Gregory of Nyssa and Anabaptism

In *De Professione Christiana*, Gregory of Nyssa declares, “If we who are united to him by faith in him, are synonymous with him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with the incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements which follow along with it,”⁶⁴ which he identifies as the divine virtues emanating from God. For Gregory, the nucleus of Christianity is ontological or existential rather than epistemic:⁶⁵ “The Lord does not say it is blessed to know [...] something about God, but to have God present within oneself.”⁶⁶

Such emphasis on “onto-behavioral” Christianity resembles early Anabaptist emphases. Hans Schlaffer, after describing behavioral characteristics such as forgiving the sins of others, declares that “From all of this it is easy to conclude who are the true believers and proper Christians and who not. Since not everyone who says Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does the will of the heavenly Father.”⁶⁷ Michael Sattler identifies the defining element of being a Christian as love, “without which it is not possible that you be a Christian congregation.”⁶⁸ Peter Riedeman identifies the core of Christianity as ontological affiliation with Christ: “We confess also that God has, through Christ, chosen, accepted and sought a people for himself, not having spot, blemish, wrinkle, or any such thing, but pure and holy, as he, himself, is holy.”⁶⁹

Drawing on Alvin Beachy’s equation of the Anabaptist view of salvation with divinization,⁷⁰ Thomas Finger claims that “*Vergöttung*”⁷¹ was a common theme among early South German/Austrian Anabaptists, while

expressions like ‘partakers of the divine nature,’ with obvious allusion to 2 Peter 1:4, frequently appeared in later South German/Austrian and Dutch Anabaptist circles.”⁷² Dirk Philips affirms that Christ’s followers become “participants in the divine nature, yes, and are called gods and children of the Most High”⁷³ and that “whoever has become a partaker of the divine character, the being of Jesus Christ and the power and character of the Holy Spirit, conforms himself to the image of Jesus Christ in all submission, obedience, and righteousness serves God, in summary is a right-believing Christian.”⁷⁴ In order to incorporate all major strands of 16th-century Anabaptism – Swiss, Dutch, and South German-Austrian – Finger employs more inclusive language: “However, since divinization language was uncommon among Swiss Anabaptists, I proposed the broader concept of *ontological transformation*, of which divinization is a variety, to designate the personal dimension of the coming of the new creation.”⁷⁵

In addition to this ontological urgency of Anabaptism, the patristic era, and Gregory of Nyssa, the ineffability of the christological composition and trinitarian economy that the creeds seek to disclose also leads us to re-examine the apparent creedal rigidity and noeticism of the patristic era. In this regard, Gregory serves as a capable example.

Beyond Abstraction: The Narrative of Jesus and God’s *Energieia*

Regulating Conceptual Efficacy: Gregory of Nyssa’s Apophasis

We soon recognize the centrality of an “apophatic”⁷⁶ outlook in Gregory of Nyssa’s writings. The incomprehensibility and ineffability of the divine essence is arguably *the* most prominent element in his philosophy. Further, he acknowledges the epistemological limits imposed on humans. Robert Brightman claims that “apophaticism is central” in Gregory’s approach⁷⁷ while insisting “that man cannot know the essence of God” is “at the heart” of Gregory’s theology.⁷⁸ Brightman contends that any study that “does not give adequate treatment to his apophaticism is *ipso facto* defective.”⁷⁹ Gregory himself declares:

The divine nature, whatever it may be in itself, surpasses every mental concept (*epinoias*). For it is altogether inaccessible to reasoning and conjecture, nor has there been found any human faculty capable of perceiving the incomprehensible;

for we cannot devise a means of understanding inconceivable things.⁸⁰

As Deirdre Carabine recognizes,⁸¹ Gregory is acutely aware of the limited function of trinitarian metaphysical categories, as he explains in his *Great Catechism*:

And so one who severely studies the depths of the mystery, receives secretly in his spirit, indeed, a moderate amount of apprehension of the doctrine of God's nature, yet he is unable to explain clearly in words the ineffable depth of this mystery. As, for instance, how the same thing is capable of being numbered and yet rejects numeration; how it is observed with distinctions yet is apprehended as a monad, how it is separate as to personality yet is not divided as to subject matter.⁸²

Gregory concedes the insufficiency of metaphysical categories to summarize the trinitarian economy. However, he applies his apophatic outlook not only to the divine essence and the trinitarian economy but to each *hypostasis* separately, since they each share in God's *ousia*:⁸³

Whatever your thought suggests to you as to the mode of the existence of the Father, you will think also in the case of the Son, and in like manner too of the Holy Ghost.[...] For the account of the uncreated and of the incomprehensible is one and the same in the case of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. For one is not more incomprehensible and uncreated than another.⁸⁴

This is not surprising, given Gregory's common reference to the divine and human relationship in Christ as a "mystery of the incarnation"⁸⁵ and a "mystery of godliness."⁸⁶ Gregory insists that the union of divine and human in the person of Christ is "beyond all circumscription."⁸⁷

Despite his cynicism about the limited function of theological concepts, Gregory does offer hope. He insists that they correspond to the *operations* (Greek, *energeia*) of the Godhead, as opposed to its essence.⁸⁸ After mentioning terms commonly used to characterize the divine essence, he asks, "Do they indicate his operations, or his Nature? No one will say that they indicate aught but his operations."⁸⁹ Theological concepts are

reflections of divine actions as apprehended in the created realm, not of the divine essence: “When we look at the order of creation, we form in our mind an image not of the essence, but of the wisdom of him who has made all things wisely.”⁹⁰ God is “invisible by nature, but becomes visible in his energies, for he may be contemplated in the things that are referred to him.”⁹¹ This is precisely how God is “known by analogy.”⁹²

An Anabaptist Response

Gregory’s apophaticism is not represented in early Anabaptist theology to the extent accentuated by the Church Fathers, especially in the East. But Anabaptist emphases do demonstrate the limited function of objective theistic descriptions, and their language is at times compellingly similar to that of patristic sources. The Anabaptists’ stress on communal biblical hermeneutics reveals their acknowledging subjective dissonance when comparing one interpretation to another, thus requiring a certain amount of cooperation when illuminating scripture. Menno Simons insisted that church members could not use “human investigation” to conceptually explain and add to scripture’s “incomprehensible depths” but should “walk all their lives before their God with calm, glad hearts.”⁹³ His analogy, comparing the inability to conceptualize God to pouring “the River Rhine or Meuse into a quart bottle,”⁹⁴ is remarkably similar to Gregory’s statement that as the “hollow of one’s hand is to the whole deep, so is all the power of language in comparison with that nature which is unspeakable and incomprehensible.”⁹⁵

Menno additionally declares that “This one and only eternal, omnipotent, incomprehensible (*unerforschliche*), invisible, ineffable, and indescribable God, we believe and confess with the Scriptures to be the eternal, incomprehensible Father with his eternal, incomprehensible Son, and with his eternal, incomprehensible Holy Spirit,”⁹⁶ while claiming that Christ is not a “literal word” but is instead the “*incomprehensible Word*” (emphasis added).⁹⁷ Within the Anabaptists’ Western setting, such apophatic language is quite striking and significant, particularly when tethered to their attitude toward the creeds as powerless to preserve an onto-behavioral focus.

Adherents of nascent Anabaptism sought instead to imitate Jesus’ observable teachings and example, and to determine how far Jesus’ actions

correspond to the operations of God, something of which humans can certainly obtain knowledge, as Gregory argued above. Alain Epp Weaver relates how John Howard Yoder concluded that for early Anabaptists, “the proper way to discuss Jesus’ unity with God was in terms of his motivation and his actions. [...] Such unity, which makes visible Jesus’ perfect *obedience* to the *will* of the Father, has ethical and political implications.”⁹⁸ Christ’s observable actions thus directly correspond to God’s *energeia* or operations. Since Jesus manifested his authority by means of observable behavior, what it means to be a Christian revolves around the extent to which a human replicates such behavior; the nucleus of Christianity for 16th-century Anabaptism was thus behavioral and transformational, rather than knowledge-based.

Menno again leads his audience to Christ’s very words and actions to be observed and imitated, in addition to complying with the creeds’ conceptual structures:

I trust also that we who are grains of the one loaf agree not only as to the twelve articles [of the Apostle’s Creed] (as [Gellius Faber] counts them), but also to all the articles of the Scriptures, such as *regeneration, repentance, baptism, Holy Supper, expulsion*, etc. which Christ Jesus [whom together with Isaiah, Peter and Paul confess to be *the only (einzige)* foundation of the churches – and not the twelve articles as he has it (*und nicht jene zwölf Artikel, wie er thut*)] has preached by his own blessed mouth, and left and taught us in clear and plain words (*und mit deutlichen Worten gelehrt und hinterlassen hat*) [emphasis added].⁹⁹

Jesus’ words are clear and plain for the purpose of *Nachfolge* or discipleship. Elsewhere, Menno affirms Jesus’ salvific role, not because of his metaphysical composition but because of the “acts and attributes which are found in abundance with Him, as may be clearly deduced and understood from [...] Scriptures.”¹⁰⁰ These acts are Jesus’ authority to forgive sins, judge humanity, and discuss the nature of the kingdom of God; because of this, Jesus “bestows eternal life”¹⁰¹ or has the capacity and authority to do so.

Pilgrim Marpeck identifies the foundation for Christian practice and responsibility as the observation of Jesus’ words and example derived from the biblical narrative, not from intellectual exploration:

Nor can an inward testimony be recognized, except when it is preceded by such outward teaching, deeds, commands and ceremonies of Christ which belong to the revelation of the Son of God in the flesh and which are like a new creation in Christ. These things must be received in a physical manner before the inner testimony can be felt and recognized. Although reason and thought and almost all conceited spirits strongly resist this act, nevertheless, they must all come under the physical feet of Christ.¹⁰²

Marpeck is attempting to subordinate “reason” and “inner testimony” under the physicality of Christ’s teachings and deeds, the latter informing humanity of its salvific status and how far it has become a new creation in Christ. Dirk Philips also states that human obedience is rooted in the biblical witness of Christ rather than in creedal proclamations, since “humans do not live by other human words brought forth out of human will, but alone by the words of God proclaimed to us through Christ Jesus and his apostles.”¹⁰³

Anabaptist leaders were thus content to acknowledge the intersection between the motives of both Jesus and God apart from the assistance of human words. This affirms Gregory’s insistence that God’s *energeia* can be known, while Jesus’ salvific authority can be determined based on how far his actions and teachings replicate the Father’s actions and teachings.

Christian Responsibility Preserved by Subsequently Developed Creeds

The Fusion of Spirituality and Theology: Gregory of Nyssa’s Theological Chronology and Priorities

In order to verify how Gregory is in solidarity with the patristic concern for inner transformation and behavior, and how doctrine developed after and in support of this ethical concern, we must determine how his christology and trinitarian convictions sustain his pre-existing soteriology. We may thus ascertain his theological motive, the same stimulus as that of the early Church Fathers who sought to systematize a theology to abate decadent behavior arising from an accommodating heretical ideology.

Accordingly, we must show that Gregory’s soteriology appeared first, after which his christological and triadological formulations emerged consequentially. In fact, since one is permitted to apprehend God’s *energeia*

alone, God's salvific operations *must* be recognized initially, after which Christ's divine/human composition can be approached delicately and cautiously within a pre-established soteriological framework. Brian Daley expresses how Gregory is unique in this regard:

[Gregory] is concerned above all with Jesus Christ as the man in whom and through whom the infinite and saving reality of God touches us all: with preserving the transcendence of the God who is present in him, and with emphasizing the transformation of that human reality which God, in the man Jesus, has made his own.¹⁰⁴

One method for determining if his soteriology was envisaged first is to consider whether Gregory may have formulated an *ad hoc* christology dependent on the situation in which he found himself.

Gregory's customization of christological language to substantiate specific features of his soteriology is quite evident. His emphasis on Christ's humanity is conspicuously expressed in *Ad Simplicium de Fide*: "He who was formed in the virgin's womb [...] is the servant, and *not* the Lord. [...] He who was created as the beginning of his ways is *not* God, but the man in whom God was manifested to us for the renewing again of the ruined way of man's salvation" (emphasis added).¹⁰⁵ Christ is thus seen as human because humans need salvation and the restoration of the likeness of God.

However, when the context is reversed, Gregory modifies his accent. Johannes Zachhuber claims that Gregory "under the pressure of maintaining, against Eunomius, the salvific necessity of Christ's full divinity, shifted the emphasis of his soteriology away from the humanistic approach [...] towards an approach stressing the salvific activity of the Logos."¹⁰⁶ Notice the austere contrast between the sentiment expressed in *Ad Simplicium de Fide* and that conveyed in *Contra Eunomium*: "Then he took dust from the earth and formed man, again he took dust from the virgin and *not only* formed man, *but formed him around himself*; then he created, afterwards he was created; then the word made flesh, afterwards the *word became flesh* in order to *transform our flesh into spirit* by partaking of our flesh and blood" (emphasis added).¹⁰⁷ Evidently, Gregory is more concerned with maintaining a balanced soteriological approach by conveniently stressing Christ's humanity or divinity and his equal status within the trinitarian

economy when required.¹⁰⁸ It is this balance that had to be immortalized in the final Nicene-Constantinopolitan formula.

Gregory is thus a fitting example of the fusion of spirituality and theology. In addition to his concern for substantiating a pre-existing soteriological outlook, his insistence that we must attend to our spiritual needs before participating in theological speculation is even more pronounced.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, our progressive transformation into, and union with, the Incarnate Christ is itself the way we know and see God with the eye of the soul.

He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, [that] is, with his sense perceptions, which are [...] wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.¹¹⁰

Again Gregory maintains it is God who is “promised to the vision of those whose heart has been purified.”¹¹¹ One recognizes the identity of the archetype, namely the Incarnate Christ, by beholding one’s own purified soul: “If a man who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires; and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his own purity, he sees the archetype in the image.”¹¹²

For Gregory, doing theology, in the sense of ascertaining the metaphysical composition of Christ and the Trinity that the creeds seek to expound, involves inferring from one’s own purity and the synergistic process involved, what the Incarnate Christ is. As Lossky observes, “This mystery of faith as personal encounter and ontological participation is the unique foundation of theological language, a language that apophysis opens to the silence of deification.”¹¹³ Participation in the purification process *is* doing theology.

An Anabaptist Response

In effect, early Anabaptist leaders re-initiated the historical concatenation of events surrounding the creeds to resemble what unfolded in first-century Palestine before the composition of any detailed Rule of Faith. History

teaches that an understanding of Christ's metaphysical composition was formulated *after* acknowledging the exceptionality and significance of Jesus' behavior, ministry, and message, and *after* resolving to obey and imitate this same Jesus. Menno affirms that it is Jesus "whom we should serve and worship; that he is the truth, the One who forgives sins and bestows eternal life, in whom we must believe and who at the last day will raise us from the dead and judge us as it has been said, and *so it follows* of necessity (*so ist es gewiss unwiderlegbar*) that Jesus Christ must be true God with the Father" (emphasis added).¹¹⁴ Obedience to Christ emerges as a result of observing those actions of Jesus that correspond to the operations¹¹⁵ (*energeia*) of God (forgiving sins and bestowing eternal life); after identifying the salvific authority of Christ, Menno is prepared to follow him (in whom we must believe) and therefore establishes a rudimentary soteriological directive.

Here Menno can validate the creedal claims concerning Christ and his relationship to the Father within the trinitarian economy. Significantly, Menno equates God's operations that Jesus embodies as "glories, honors, works, and attributes which belong to no one in heaven nor upon the earth, except to the only eternal and true God."¹¹⁶ This again shows how Christ's exceptionality and salvific authority and license could be acknowledged apart from philosophical disclosure and instead through Christ's fulfillment of OT patterns and precepts.

The priority in Anabaptism of purity of life and ontological soteriology, both chronologically and ecclesiastically, nuances the function of creedal descriptions. Early Anabaptists did not engage the creeds unless they were initiated into the discussion externally.¹¹⁷ Finger's contention that "while Creeds provide a somewhat unnatural starting-point for Mennonites in ecumenical discussion, they do provide a possible one,"¹¹⁸ though theoretically true, can lead to difficulties and internal contradictions that may be why early Anabaptists rarely invoked the creeds as a starting point unless they felt it was necessary to draw attention to their limitations.¹¹⁹ In this way, since the creeds were a historical reality for 16th-century Anabaptist leaders, they commandeered their high christological claims in an attempt to convince the wider church of the normativity of Jesus' teachings and example for Christian ethics.

Ben Ollenburger's somewhat dubious citation of Menno in a recent issue of *Mennonite Life*¹²⁰ exemplifies the agenda of those who seem less

willing to account for the nuances inherent in early Anabaptist engagement with the creeds. Ollenburger provides a three-sentence quotation that spans five pages in the original, using it to affirm Menno's endorsement of the creedal formula. What it omits are the ethical and thus soteriological additions that motivated Menno to write about the creeds in the first place. The missing elements include his insistence that, in addition to the creedal words, Christ is the "eternal, wise, Almighty, holy, true, living and incomprehensible Word"¹²¹ who thus "purified our hearts"¹²² so we can "serve the true and living God."¹²³ Overtly connecting soteriological concerns with trinitarian expressions contained in the creeds, Menno also states that Christians should "give no one the praise for our salvation, neither in heaven nor on earth, but the only and eternal Father through Christ Jesus, and that through the illumination of the Holy Spirit."¹²⁴ Elsewhere, with reference to Orthodox proclamations about Christ, Menno asserts that all who believe these things "obey his Word, walk in his commandments [*folgen darum seinem Wort, wandeln in seinem Geboten*], bow to his scepter, and quiet their conscience with grace, atonement, merit, sacrifice, promise, death and blood."¹²⁵

Similarly, in affirming the creedal formula and the Orthodox understanding of Jesus therein, Peter Riedeman averred, "This Word proceeded from the Father that the harm brought by the transgression of Adam might be healed, and the fall restored."¹²⁶ However, "a power other than human strength [Christ's divinity] was necessary,"¹²⁷ which has "now taken us captive into his obedience and leads us in his way, teaches us his character, ways and goodness."¹²⁸ In opposition to the more epistemic soteriology of Western Christendom, Hans Denck, in his so-called *Recantation*, affirms both Menno's and Riedeman's additions to the creeds by declaring, "*Glaube ist der gehorsam Gottes* (faith is obedience to God)."¹²⁹

If the early Anabaptists merely stated the creeds and indicated consent and unqualified endorsement, that would show they were satisfied with the creeds' structure for their own context and concerns. However, in order to criticize something, that something must be introduced into the conversation. So, although the creeds were introduced externally by virtue of their historical survival, early Anabaptists willingly addressed them not only to affirm their statements but to scrutinize them and illuminate what they omit.¹³⁰

B. Royale Dewey's remark that "rather than write off Nicea, Mennonites should be grateful for it"¹³¹ is contestable when within their own 16th-century setting the creeds failed to nurture what is central to Anabaptism, namely discipleship, nonviolence, and socio-economic equity and justice. While patristic initiatives and intentions at Nicea were arguably laudable and valid, an analysis of the process, subsequent outcomes, and political manipulation of creedal priorities warrants, for early Anabaptism, regulation of the creeds and amendment to the priorities of Christianity in general. The issue is thus not the legitimacy of the Church Fathers themselves, but the ramifications of the Constantinian and Nicene politico-ecclesial union, specifically in the West where access to the creedal mechanisms for preserving a life in Christ inherent in the Eastern conscience was limited.

The 16th-century Western context within which Anabaptism emerged required a re-focusing on ethical matters. Ideally, creedal formulations could resolve behavioral and soteriological scruples. However, with Anabaptism's emergence in a setting where the creeds were impotent to reinvigorate the affluent, fraudulent, and unscrupulous state of the magisterial Roman Catholic Church because of the separation of spirituality and theology, Anabaptist leaders had to address ethical concerns directly and explicitly. This is exactly what they did when they made soteriological additions to the creeds.¹³²

In this sense, Anabaptist attempts at persuading the historical church of the importance of priorities such as nonviolence mimic Gregory's insistence that creedal formulations emerged subsequent to, and in support of, a pre-existing soteriology. Like Gregory, the Anabaptists were primarily interested in defending their unique soteriology, which developed on the basis of observing Jesus' teachings and example as described in the biblical narrative. If the metaphysical Greek categories used to describe Christ and the Trinity can be employed to support a pre-existing soteriology, Anabaptists could appeal to them for that reason alone, much like Gregory and other patristic bishops and decision-makers did.

Indeed, as Alain Epp Weaver contends, "Nothing prevents contemporary theologians from appealing to the Creedal identification of Jesus as true man and true God in order to persuade other Christians of his normativity for ethics."¹³³ And specifically for Anabaptist values, only

a high christology can “provide the basis for discipleship to a non-resistant Jesus and an ecclesiology which renounces the violent ways of the world.”¹³⁴ Gregory is a fourth-century example of someone who contributed greatly to the discussion of appropriate christological and triadological language, but who periodically tailored this language for his own, and Orthodoxy’s, pre-established soteriological purposes.¹³⁵ However, he was interacting with an Eastern audience who recognized the soteriological significance of such creedal language; this is precisely how Anabaptism’s emergence presented itself with the opportunity to be a prophetic voice to the Western church, whose separation of spirituality and theology resulted in distorted priorities.

Although his effort to reclaim traditional Christian expressions and priorities is laudable, A. James Reimer seems to undermine the chronology inherent in the development of the creeds, as is evident from the title of his book *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*. If Reimer were more aware of the original circumstances and mindset out of which the creeds arose, the title should have been *The Ethical-Soteriological Foundation for Christian Dogmatics*.¹³⁶ In reference to the ecumenical creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries specifically, Reimer would like to see “a theological imagination that is disciplined by the doctrinal categories.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he argues that the content of the creeds has “profound implications for how we live and act.”¹³⁸ For all his oversights, J. Denny Weaver is nevertheless more responsible in his management of history in this regard: “If Jesus Christ is our foundation, then it is Jesus’ story and the ‘politics of Jesus’ – not the shape of a national ethos or fourth- and fifth-century Creedal formulas – that should determine the contour of our theological agenda,”¹³⁹ a claim congruent at least with Finger’s methodology though not his conclusions.¹⁴⁰ This assessment in no way conflicts with the priorities and typical avowal of the Church Fathers, and, surprising as this may be to someone of Weaver’s persuasion, is a sentiment shared by nearly all Orthodox theologians.

Reimer should be praised for trying to resurrect classical expressions of Christianity. However, by acknowledging the chronology that anticipated the creeds (while rejecting the notion that they function(ed) as a *foundation* for ethics) and by affirming, indeed living, the fusion of spirituality and

theology inherent in any dogmatic investigation by the Church Fathers, we could follow through with Reimer's vision while allowing ourselves to be better informed by the patristic conscience. Such an approach will, I hope, also appease those holding to Weaver's view, since behavior, ethics, and soteriological concerns are not only enhanced by what the creeds communicate about the fusion of theology and spirituality, but, more significantly, because the church's ethico-soteriological concerns could be – and indeed were – acknowledged *before* and *apart from* creedal prescriptions.

Conclusion

By evaluating the 16th-century Anabaptist attitude toward the creeds through examining the appropriate textual attestation as well as patristic sources, and particularly those of St. Gregory of Nyssa, what it means to be a Christian from a historical perspective begins to surface. If creeds were developed to preserve a pre-established emphasis on obedience and the imitation of Jesus, and could not even be formulated veraciously until this obedience and imitation or purification took place *first*, undoubtedly the nucleus of Christianity was, in both patristic and Anabaptist thought, the ontological affiliation of its adherents to the example and person of Christ.

Eastern Christianity, with its distinctive history, is entitled to endorse this decidedly ontological understanding of what it means to be a Christian with the use of creedal concepts alone, since here the fusion of spirituality and theology has not been defiled. However, in much of the Christian West, while retaining the possibility that the dominant epistemic conception of faith and doctrine might be forfeited in the future, the creeds' ethical and ontological implications must be addressed unequivocally and forthrightly. Sixteenth-century Anabaptism's resolve to do exactly that is justifiable when we consider the degeneracy of their ecclesial context, the consequence of the segregation of theology (doctrine) from spirituality (ontology), with the former regrettably taking precedence. The assimilation of the Anabaptists' accent on the purity of the church with their affirming yet restrained approach to the creeds suggests a return to an emphasis on *repentance* and *restoration* typical of the patristic era, and an intentional estrangement from the unbridled, often violent focus on *recantation* during the sixteenth-century Western ecclesial setting.

Notes

¹ See discussions on the creeds by J. Denny Weaver in *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000); by A. James Reimer in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001); the dialogue in *Mennonite Life* (September 2005) among Ben C. Ollenburger, B. Royale Dewey, J. Denny Weaver, Duane K. Friesen, and Gerald Biesecker-Mast; and a paper presentation at the Anabaptist Colloquium at Eastern Mennonite University, April 7-8, 2006 by Andy Alexis-Baker, "Anabaptist Use of Patristic Literature and Creeds."

² Roland Bainton, "The Left Wing of the Reformation," *The Journal of Religion* 21.2 (April 1941): 125.

³ Robert Friedmann, "Conception of Anabaptists," *Church History* 9.4 (December 1940): 349-50.

⁴ Some treatments of this issue that I will not be interacting with, but are worth looking into include: A. James Reimer, "Doctrines: What Are They, How Do They Function, and Why Do We Need Them?" *CGR* 11.1 (Winter 1993): 21-36; A. James Reimer, "Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Theology from a Radical Protestant Perspective," in *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, S. Mark Heim, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, 129-61); J. Denny Weaver, "Christology in Historical Perspective," in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, Erland Waltner, ed. (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 83-105; J. Denny Weaver, "Christus Victor, Ecclesiology, and Christology," *MQR* 68.3 (July 1994): 277-90; John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1981), 121-58.

⁵ Even the writing of Paul's epistles and the gospel accounts, and subsequent acceptance of these writings based on what the Church already was and how it worshipped.

⁶ The emergence of these heresies required a method for determining another's ontological state or behavioral intentions, since soteriological variations resulted from specific theological deviations; it was not that being a Christian now meant believing the right thing, but that how a Christian was going to behave, or *being* a Christian, could now be predicted by her or his belief system. Latourette describes the Apostles' Creed as a symbol that was a "sign or test of membership in the Church." Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), 135. The Creed was an indicator of one's affiliation.

⁷ An Orthodox theologian observes that the Protestant concern for Christian ethics coincides with the Roman Catholic concern for moral theology and the Eastern Orthodox concern for Christian spirituality. See John Chryssavgis, *Light Through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 25n.

⁸ This opinion is voiced continually by J. Denny Weaver. While Weaver is correct to voice it where needed, he is falling victim to a separation of spirituality and theology. "Orthodox theology runs the danger of historically disincarnating the Church; by contrast, the West risks tying it primarily to history, either in the form of extreme Christocentrism ... lacking the

essential influence of pneumatology or in the form of social activism or moralism which tries to play in the Church the role of the image of God”: John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 20.

⁹ Evagrius Ponticus (346-399 C.E.) famously said that “If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.”

¹⁰ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware states that “we are to *become* theology” in his Foreword to Archimandrite Vasileios, *Hymn of Entry* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 9.

¹¹ See Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996) and his *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963); Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995) and his Foreword to *Hymn of Entry*, 9; John Chrysavgis, *Light through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹² Born around 335 C.E., Gregory of Nyssa was one of the three celebrated Cappadocian Fathers, the other two being Basil the Great, his older brother, and Gregory Nazianzen, their friend. Gregory of Nyssa continued Basil’s work on isolating appropriate triadological language, especially against the teachings of Eunomius after Basil’s death. Gregory was also involved in combating the Apollinarian heresy. Basil, then bishop of Caesarea, appointed Gregory as bishop of Nyssa in 372 C.E., a little known See in Cappadocia. He was instrumental in the second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381 C.E. and died around 395 C.E.

¹³ Most of the information on Gregory of Nyssa is adapted from Andrew Klager, *The Eye of our Soul and its ‘Ontological Gaze’: The Iconic Function of Theological Epinoia in the Philosophy and Spirituality of Gregory of Nyssa* (M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 2006).

¹⁴ Fr. John Behr, “Faithfulness and Creativity,” in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 174.

¹⁵ Fr. John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 22.

¹⁶ “Doctrine is a living *testimony* – in thought, word and experience – of what has been heard, seen and touched (1 John 1:1). It is the *tested* evidence of what has been contemplated in faith and experienced in love”: Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 58.

¹⁷ Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides* (Greek version), eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 9 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 276. Here, Aristides claims Christ was crucified because his accusers ignored his “good deeds and the countless miracles.”

¹⁸ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, IV-14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 365. Latin text from Ernest Evans, trans. and ed., *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem* (Oxford: Univ. of Oxford Press, 1972).

¹⁹ “For God alone is without sin; and the only man without sin is Christ, since Christ is also God.” Tertullian, *De Anima*, XLI, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 221. Latin text from J. H. Waszink, trans. and ed., *Tertullianus, De anima* (Amsterdam, 1947).

²⁰ “[B]eing in truth the God and Christ of Israel [...] He raised also the widow’s son from death [...] Now so evidently had the Lord Christ introduced no other god for the working

of so momentous a miracle as this, that all who were present gave glory to the Creator.” Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, IV-18, in *op. cit.*, 375.

²¹ Addressing Marcion’s allegation concerning the demiurge of the OT and his dissociation with the God of Jesus Christ, Tertullian declares, “You ought to be very much ashamed of yourself on this account too, for permitting him [Christ] to appear on the retired mountain in the company of Moses and Elias, whom he had come to destroy. This, to be sure, was what he wished to be understood as the meaning of that voice from heaven: ‘This is my beloved Son, hear him.’” Tertullian designates Jesus as the *Christus creatoris* on evidence of the transfiguration. *Ibid.*, 382-83.

²² Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 69-70.

²³ Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides* (Syriac version), in *op. cit.*, 265. Cf. Aristides, *Apology XV*, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, ed. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), 49.

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 330-31.

²⁵ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 249.

²⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, 509-10.

²⁷ Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of one Noetus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 230.

²⁸ Origen, *De Principiis*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, 240-41.

²⁹ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *A Declaration of Faith*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, 7.

³⁰ Cyprian, *Epistle LXIX: To Januarius and Other Numidian Bishops, on Baptizing Heretics*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 376.

³¹ Immediately before delineating his Creed, the early second-century bishop of Antioch, St. Ignatius declared, “Become the imitators of his suffering, and of his love.” Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*, in *op. cit.*, 69.

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), 7-8; Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1957), 9-10; Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 73; Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 31, 34.

³³ “For tradition is thought to be ancient, hallowed by age, unchanged since it was first established once upon a time. It does not have a history, since history implies the appearance, at a certain point in time, of that which had not been there before”: Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, 7-8.

³⁴ Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 598. Latin text from Ernest Evans, trans. and ed., *Adversus Praxean liber* (London: SPCK, 1948).

³⁵ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 246. Latin text from R.F. Refoulé, trans., *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, in *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. 1, ed. Dom Eligius Dekkers (Turnholt: Brepols, 1957).

³⁶ Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 126.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁸ Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1, 123.

³⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁴¹ Some Gnostics “felt free to go to pagan festivals and to gladiatorial contests, and even to have irregular unions with women who had accepted their doctrines.” Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1, 125.

⁴² “Now if this ‘being made god’, this *theosis*, is to be possible, Christ the Saviour must be both fully God and fully human”: Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 20.

⁴³ John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 107.

⁴⁴ “In the Orthodox Church, the authority of the early Fathers, of the communion of the saints, reveals a virtual continuity between tradition and Christ. There is, here, no stifling enslavement to tradition but rather a striking embodiment of tradition, whose authority lies more in living and less in professing or decreeing”: Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 49.

⁴⁵ Peter Bouteneff, *Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth*, Foundations Series, vol. 3 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 20.

⁴⁶ J. Denny Weaver in *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 113. Weaver wonders whether there could be an alternative to the more philosophical concerns of the historical creeds by appealing to the life, behavior, actions, and teachings of Christ as recorded in the NT. He has in mind the nonviolence of Jesus.

⁴⁷ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), 286.

⁴⁸ Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, as quoted in Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 8.

⁴⁹ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Foreword to *Hymn of Entry*, 9. See also Archimandrite Vasileos, *Hymn of Entry*, 17-39 for an excellent analysis.

⁵⁰ Bouteneff, *Sweeter than Honey*, 36.

⁵¹ Ibid., 39.

⁵² Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 57. Recall Friedmann’s contention that Anabaptism is more “existential” than representing any systematic expression of theology. Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation*. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, vol. 15 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 18.

⁵³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 14. Cf. 8-10.

⁵⁴ Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁶ Serge S. Verhovskoy, *The Light of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 12.

⁵⁷ Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 57.

⁵⁸ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 9.

⁵⁹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 16-17.

⁶⁰ John Meyendorff, “Light from the East? ‘Doing Theology’ in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 340.

⁶¹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 12.

⁶² Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1, 146.

⁶³ Latourette explains how both the Novatians and Donatists “broke from the Catholic Church in part or entirely in protest against what they held to be too great leniency of the latter towards moral lapses, especially apostasy.” Ibid., 216. The Inquisition helped shift Christian corrective measures and emphasis from the rigorous penitential procedure of the patristic era (ethical or behavioral-based) to recantation (knowledge-based). This shift had a large impact on the more than four thousand Anabaptist martyrs highly touted for their ethical and moral behavior by the same magistrates who executed them.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On What it Means to Call Oneself a Christian*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 58 (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1967), 84.

⁶⁵ Lossky emphasizes the regulated though not entirely destroyed or restricted efficacy of theological knowledge: Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 14.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, in Hilda C. Graef, trans., *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 18 (New York: Paulist Press, 1954), 148. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecae*, vol. 44 (Paris, 1863), 1269-1270C.

⁶⁷ Hans Schlaffer, *A Brief Instruction for the Beginning of a Truly Christian Life*, in *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, trans. Walter Klaassen, et al. ed. C. Arnold Snyder, *Classics of the Radical Reformation*, vol.10 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 85.

⁶⁸ Michael Sattler, *Imprisonment: Letter to Horb*, in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. and ed. John Howard Yoder, *Classics of the Radical Reformation*, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 59.

⁶⁹ Peter Riedeman, *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith* (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1970), 38.

⁷⁰ “Five of the seven representatives of the Radical Reformation [...] (Menno, Dirk Philips, Denck, Hoffmann, Schwenckfeld, while Hubmaier and Marpeck do not) specifically state that their concept of salvation is that of the divinization of man [...] Thus, grace is for the Radical Reformers not so much a forensic change in status before God as it is an ontological change within the individual believer [...]”: Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1977), 4.

⁷¹ “divinization”

⁷² Thomas N. Finger, “Response to J. Denny Weaver’s ‘Parsing Anabaptist Theology,’” *Direction Journal* 35.1 (Spring 2006): 152 (note 8). For a succinct analysis of the “personal dimension” of Anabaptist soteriology and “the coming of the new creation,” see Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 109-32. Cf. Frances F. Hiebert, “The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology,” *Direction* 30.2 (Fall 2001): 122-38.

⁷³ Dirk Philips, *The Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, in *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, trans. and ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and Alvin J. Beachy, *Classics of the Radical Reformation*, vol. 6 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 145.

⁷⁴ Dirk Philips, *The New Birth and the New Creature*, in *op. cit.*, 294.

⁷⁵ Finger, "Response to J. Denny Weaver's 'Parsing Anabaptist Theology,'" 152 (note 8).

⁷⁶ Often referred to as "negative theology," the apophatic approach to theistic discourse is derived from the Greek *apophatike*, which means "away from speech": Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 2. Carabine asserts that "We may understand apophatic theology to begin with the assertion that God is unknowable to the human mind and that one must proceed by means of negations, ultimately, even to the negation of the negation in order to attain to some 'positive' knowledge of him." See also J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 3-4.

⁷⁷ Robert S. Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18.1-2 (1973): 111.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, op. cit., 146.

⁸¹ "[Gregory affirms] that all the qualities predicated of the Father must also, of necessity, be predicated on the Son and the Spirit. The consequences [...] are immediately clear: if the Father's primary characteristic is unknowability, then the same must be true of the Son and the Spirit." Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 248.

⁸² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. William Moore, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 477.

⁸³ Greek ontological term usually denoting the *essence* or *substance* of a thing.

⁸⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter XXXVIII*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 8, 138.

⁸⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, II:159, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 93.

⁸⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, Bk. II, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5, 101.

⁸⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 486.

⁸⁸ "Gregory in effect denies that the *ousia* of anything can be comprehended through its *energeia*. But in the case of God, it is only the *energeia* that we can know." Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 117.

⁸⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5, 265.

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, 147.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Menno Simons, *Confession of the Triune God*, in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, ed. J.C. Wenger and trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 497-98.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, Bk. VII, 198.

⁹⁶ Simons, *Confession of the Triune God*, 491.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 491-92. “Inasmuch as God is such a Spirit, as it is written, therefore we also believe and confess the eternal, begetting heavenly Father and the eternally begotten Son, Christ Jesus. Brethren, ... they are spiritual and incomprehensible (*geistlich und unbegreiflich*), as is also the Father who begat; for like begets like. This is incontrovertible” (491). With the number of times Menno uses the terms *unerforschliche*, *unaussprechliche* and *unbegreiflich*, we could conclude that he became acquainted with *apophysis* from his education for the priesthood, exposure to Canon Law, and *glossa ordinaria* or the various patristic *florilegia* of his era.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Simons, *Reply to Gellius Faber*, in *op. cit.*, 761. German text from Menno Simons, *Klare Beantwortung einer Schrift des Gellius Faber*, in *op. cit.*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Simons, *Confession of the Triune God*, 493.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 494. Referring to the impotence of creeds to affect obedience, Menno observes, “These foolish people imagine that they are Christian, but are to my mind more unbelieving, blinder, more hardened, and worse than Turks, Tartars, or any other far away heathen. *Their works testify that I write the truth*. They cannot be moved to hear or obey the truth by godly means and services, *neither by doctrine nor exhortation [...]*” (emphasis added). Simons, *True Christian Faith*, in *op. cit.*, 384.

¹⁰² Pilgrim Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck*, eds. and trans. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 78-79.

¹⁰³ Dirk Philips, *Concerning the True Knowledge of Jesus Christ*, in *op. cit.*, 167.

¹⁰⁴ Brian E. Daley, “Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa’s Anti-Apollinarian Christology,” in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 73.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Faith*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5, 337; *Ad Simplicium de Fide*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graecae*, vol. 45 (Paris, 1863). The Greek form of “not” that Gregory uses here is *οὐχ*, which he employs only one other time in this treatise to indicate that the heretical view of Christ as not sharing in the Father’s essence is “not (*οὐχ*) our God.”

¹⁰⁶ Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 217.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, as quoted in Zachhuber, 216.

¹⁰⁸ For Ware, in a situation where an important characteristic of Christ is undervalued, this characteristic must be accentuated to preserve the ontological affiliation with Christ, deification, *theosis*, salvation. “A bridge is formed between God and humanity by the Incarnate Christ who is divine and human at once.[...] Each heresy in turn undermined some part of this vital affirmation.[...] Each council defended this affirmation”: Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ For an Eastern Orthodox espousal of the notion that our capacity and authority to engage in theological inquiry is commensurate with our purity, see Chrysavgis, *Light Through Darkness*, 53 and 56, and Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, 17.

¹¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, II:157, 93.

¹¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, 143.

¹¹² Ibid., 149.

¹¹³ Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, 25.

¹¹⁴ Simons, *Confession of the Triune God*, 494. German text from Simons, *Ein ermahnendes Bekenntniss von dem dreieinigen, ewigen und wahren Gott, Vater, Sohn und heiligen Geist*, in *op. cit.*, 261.

¹¹⁵ Menno uses “operation” in reference to how one approaches God in hopes of salvation: “Who is it that is raised up into the new life by the faith of the operation of God? Once more, is it not the believer?” Simons, *Christian Baptism*, in *op. cit.*, 261.

¹¹⁶ Simons, *Confession of the Triune God*, 494.

¹¹⁷ For an example of how Anabaptists interacted with the creeds when the issue was initiated into the discussion externally, see Simons, *Reply to Gellius Faber*, 625-781.

¹¹⁸ Thomas N. Finger, “The Way to Nicea: Some Reflections from a Mennonite Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24.2 (Spring 1987): 229.

¹¹⁹ J. Denny Weaver illuminates two such problems: (1) If Mennonites initiate an ecumenical discussion by invoking the Creeds, they are admitting the insignificance and dispensable nature of distinctively Anabaptist elements such as nonviolence and discipleship; (2) It is contradictory to affirm the salience of the creeds that neglect the elements many early Anabaptists sought to preserve through martyrdom. See his “Identifying Anabaptist Theology: A Response to ‘True Evangelical Faith: The Anabaptists and Christian Confession,’” *Mennonite Life* 60.3 (Sept. 2005): <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005Sept/weaver%20response.php>. Weaver’s perspective on the creeds may be somewhat purpose-specific, where some of Reimer’s more insightful reflections might be able to fill it out more, but it is a moderating voice that must be heard, nevertheless.

¹²⁰ Ben Ollenburger, “True Evangelical Faith: The Anabaptists and Christian Confession,” *Mennonite Life* 60.3 (Sept. 2005): <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005Sept/ollenburger.php>.

¹²¹ Simons, *Confessions of the Triune God*, 491.

¹²² Ibid., 492.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 493. I admit that I am sporadically quoting from these same five pages, but with the sole purpose of filling in the gaps left by Ollenburger.

¹²⁵ Simons, *The True Christian Faith*, 392. German text from Simons, *vom rechten, christlichen Glauben*, 219.

¹²⁶ Riedeman, *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith*, 22.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁹ Hans Denck, *Wideruff* [1527], in *Schriften*, ed. Walter Fellman, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*, bd. 6 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1956), 107. Hans Denck, *Recantation*, in *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts*, trans. and ed. Clarence Bauman, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, vol. 47 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 253.

¹³⁰ “A Jesus identified only in the abstract categories of ‘man’ and ‘God’ cannot be followed. When faith in Jesus Christ, or being *Christian*, means to shape one’s life by his teaching

and example, these formulas are insufficient; they have omitted the specifics of the New Testament narrative on which faith can be based [and] describe Christ apart from his rejection of the sword and teachings about love of enemies.... The formulas do not give shape to the peaceable community of Jesus' disciples that poses a contrast to the world. In effect, they have marginalized ethics from christological understanding, or have provided the space for ethics to express convictions that do not stem from the particularity of Jesus": Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 124-25. I would nuance Weaver's thoughts by appealing to the Eastern fusion of spirituality and theology, but Weaver's fittingly acerbic comments should be heeded for the current state of the Western, and specifically North American, church.

¹³¹ B. Royale Dewey, "Making Peace with History: Anabaptism and the Nicene Creed," *Mennonite Life* 60.3 (Sept. 2005): <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005Sept/dewey.php>.

¹³² "[I]n evaluating any Creed Mennonites will likely ask not only what it affirms but also what it leaves out, as well as what its ecclesiastical and social functions are": Thomas N. Finger, "The Way to Nicea: Some Reflections from a Mennonite Perspective," 212.

¹³³ Alain Epp Weaver, "Missionary Christology: John Howard Yoder and the Creeds," *MQR* 74.3 (July 2000): 426. Weaver gives credit for this idea to John Howard Yoder.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 436.

¹³⁵ For examples of how Gregory emphasized either Jesus' humanity or divinity in different situations, see Andrew Klager, *The Eye of our Soul and its 'Ontological Gaze': The Iconic Function of Theological Epinoia in the Philosophy and Spirituality of Gregory of Nyssa* (M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 2006), 67-71.

¹³⁶ To achieve the results Reimer seeks, it would be better to educate an Anabaptist audience on the creeds' importance not by showing how ethical behavior can be derived from creedal expressions but by showing that the creeds emerged in service of a pre-existing understanding of salvation. Becoming cognizant of the historically accurate sequence is a better service to the ongoing debate.

¹³⁷ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*, 355.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹³⁹ Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 47. Stuart Hall contrasts the nucleus of Jesus' instruction with that of the creeds: "The one belongs to a world of Syrian peasants, the other to a world of Greek philosophers.... [W]hy an ethical sermon stood at the forefront of the teaching of Jesus Christ and a metaphysical Creed in the forefront of the Christianity of the fourth century is a problem which claims investigation"; see Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 240. "Dogmatic definitions are made with the means and content of a given epoch and [...]. reflect the style and peculiarities of that epoch. The Christological controversies and the definitions of the ecumenical councils most certainly reflect the spirit of Greek thought": Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 31-32.

¹⁴⁰ Finger discusses investigating the person of Christ "from above" or "from below." He favors the latter, which is how he discusses the work and person of Christ, as does Weaver

but with less nuance. See Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*, 330. Finger also acknowledges the correct chronology that anticipated the creedal formulations in the 16th-century Anabaptists and therefore the fusion of spirituality and theology.

Andrew P. Klager, a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow, is evaluating sixteenth-century Anabaptist literary access to patristic sources, with special attention to Balthasar Hubmaier.

REFLECTION

Dialogue of the Feet: A Mennonite Sojourn Through Mindanao A Trip to Survey MCC's Inter-faith Relationships in Mindanao's Trouble Spots

Jon Rudy

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteers cannot help but engage persons of other faiths when living and working in a religiously pluralistic context. Often the most significant encounters happen in the humblest ways, over a cup of tea. These little conversations accumulate significant relational capital and run counter to growing religious antagonism and fracture evident in so much of the world today.

The Anabaptist tradition inculcates a biblical set of values that have a practical side to them when engaging the religious neighbors. These values make bridges, in turn creating space where conflict over ideology or resources has left little room for conversation. Through a relational orientation, careful listening, incarnating Jesus' love, honesty, and a belief in transformation, amazing dialogical space is opened up. For MCC in the Southern Philippine context, these values have helped to span the gaps between peoples locked in decades-long violent conflict.

This is the story of a sojourn by five Mennonites who connected with broad spectrum of MCC's interfaith relationships on the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The reader will be introduced to some friends of MCC who are co-laborers in the field of inter-faith conversations, in order to extract the underlying principles that draw Mennonites to those partners. For the reader, then, these practical examples will form a dialogue of the feet.

I found myself standing in between two Catholic priests who have a well-known history of being at odds with each other over approaches to inter-faith dialogue. One has a center focusing on the spirituality of inter-faith

dialogue. His approach is for people to retreat from the pressures of daily life and find an inner peace in the quiet of reflection, thus opening the doors of the heart to people of other faiths. The other priest is an activist who has been in the thick of inter-faith tensions during some difficult years. He advocates for dialogue to happen in the rough and tumble of life, getting one's hands dirty with issues of justice and peace. Here was I, a Mennonite, standing between the two priests, knowing both and empathizing greatly with each philosophy.

Being an Anabaptist within the Mindanao mix is a strange and wonderful gift. The intent is to connect that which is disconnected, moving into the empty space between two parties who are in conflict or bridging the gulf between those who are not aware of each other. The paradigm of "standing with" yet being a "bridge" symbolizes the MCC approach to inter-faith relations in the Philippines. This sojourn is representative of the tremendous relational capital built up over thirty years of MCC life and work in Mindanao, as we have been the bridge.

MCC in The Philippines: How Did We Get There?

The Mennonite Central Committee has had two complete histories in the Republic of the Philippines, a nation of more than 7,100 islands and a population of 85 million people. The two periods of MCC presence, separated by 27 years, responded to different realities. The first time frame was post-World War II, spanning 1946 to 1950, when relief and development were needed. The work was mainly in the northern island of Luzon in the mountains, and took the form of medical and housing reconstruction. The second block of history covers 1977 to 2005, when Mennonites stood in solidarity with Filipinos who were seeking justice under the repressive dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos.¹ Throughout this second period, beginning from a base in Mindanao, MCCers rubbed shoulders with many different expressions of Christianity and Islam.

On a "presence/project" continuum, the MCC program in the Philippines has been characterized by presence with Filipinos as they struggle for justice and peace in their communities. This has been done almost exclusively through seconding MCCers to organizations, whether church or secular. The work itself has been dialogical.

It was at Mennonite World Conference in Zimbabwe in 2003 that I bumped into David Shenk as he was giving a short input session on Islam and dialogue with other faiths. His input was delightful, primarily because he peppered solid biblical and Anabaptist principles with stories of his lifelong vocation of engaging other faiths in dialogue. Since September 11, 2001, he has focused primarily on engaging with Islam. I invited him to come to Mindanao to visit some of the inter-faith partnerships MCC had nurtured over the years. That invitation was reinforced by Luke Schrock-Hurst, former MCC Country Representative and Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) missionary working with the Integrated Mennonite Church (IMC) of the Philippines.

Two other persons were invited on this Mindanao Sojourn in order to give them exposure for an ongoing Anabaptist presence in Mindanao. Richard Rancap is the president of the IMC and is from Lumban, Laguna, Luzon Island of the Philippines. The IMC has only Mennonite churches in Luzon at present but has expressed interest in church planting in Mindanao. Dann Pantoja, a former activist, is a Filipino who migrated to Canada twenty years ago during the height of the purges after the fall of Marcos. Dann found his way to peace theology and is currently a member of Peace Mennonite Church in Vancouver, BC.² He has been engaged in an immersion and presence ministry among Muslims in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao to test the idea of a longer-term service to Muslim communities in the Philippines.

Religious and Historical Context

Muslims make up just five percent of the Filipino population,³ although Islam first established a beachhead in the Sulu Archipelago in c. 1380 as part of its spread throughout Asia.⁴ The Sulu Sultanate was established in 1450 and is still seen by many Muslims as the legitimate governmental system for Muslim Mindanao. The Spaniard Magellan arrived in the Philippines in 1521 and claimed them for the Spanish King. The Spanish met Muslims in Mindanao and transferred the title “Moro” to these adherents of Mohammed after the Moroccan Muslims-Moors who had occupied much of Spain for hundreds of years. What began as a pejorative term has been taken now by Mindanao Muslims as a term of pride: “Moro.”

Spanish colonization didn't begin until 1565, and the Catholic Church established a dominant presence. Today, 83 percent of Filipinos consider themselves Roman Catholic, with the Philippines having the third highest number of Catholics of any nation behind Brazil and Mexico. A quick scan of urban and rural areas reveals a large number of churches and Roman Catholic institutions.⁵ While Catholics come in many shapes and sizes, MCCers have tended to gravitate toward orders with members sharing the values of working with the poor, speaking to injustice, and building peace.

The Spanish were unable to subdue the Mindanao Moros during their colonization, and when the Americans took over Spanish territory at the end of the Spanish/American War in 1898, the Philippine Islands became a US colony. Through a combination of hard power (superior firepower) and soft power (education and treaties), the Americans drew the Moros into agreements that eventually contained their influence to a few select areas of Mindanao. Through the policy of giving land to Christian settlers from the northern islands of Luzon and the Visayas, first by the Americans and later by Filipino policy set by the Manila aristocracy, the Moro populations were diluted and made minorities in their own homelands.

This migration from the northern "Christianized" populations caused no great conflict at first. The Muslim inhabitants welcomed new neighbors and even gave them land nearby. But wiser to the ways of imported laws and statutes, the Christians registered their land and gobbled up vast tracts of property, displacing those who welcomed them in the first place. Animosity between Christian settlers and Moro inhabitants reached a peak when, fueled by third force terror and vigilante groups, executions, destruction, and displacement became a state tool under President Marcos's tyrannical rule in the 1970s and '80s. While there are still elderly people around who remember living peaceably among their religiously different neighbors, younger Muslims know only war and displacement in Mindanao.

We left early in two cars to travel the road from Cotabato to Marawi City. The day sprang up sunny and the sky was cloudless. Winding up the road outside of Cotabato, the beauty of the physical landscape belies the reality that this area was depopulated during the 2000 "all-out war" declared by President Estrada of the Philippines. The Armed Forces of the Philippines

(AFP) over-ran the Islamic Center at Camp Abubakar, a site for Muslim separatists pressing for an Islamic state in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Painful atrocities, like the AFP eating pork and drinking beer in the main mosque, are still fresh in the Moro psyche.

Passing the turn-off to Camp Abubakar reminded me that the people of this part of Mindanao face prejudice aimed at them for their Islamic roots. An occasional armored personnel carrier or truckload of soldiers, and the numerous military detachments dug into the side of the road, were reminders that the area is still heavily militarized. In recent years this stretch of road has seen many kidnappings and car-jackings, and it is not recommended to foreigners. Warned that our convoy would not be making any stops, we were surprised when our two dark-tinted-window vehicles halted on the shores of Lake Dapao in Borug for a sight-seeing stop. Further along we took a break to eat lunch at a restaurant at the southeast end of Lake Marawi. I was amazed that, in a place with such a bad reputation among westerners, we could walk freely and were shown gracious hospitality by local people who knew we were foreigners, outsiders.

Father Bert: Living Catholic Faith as Reconciliation

Maguindanao province of Mindanao is the epicenter of displacement from a series of wars since the 1970s. Our destination was the Immaculate Conception Parish in the town of Pikit to meet with Father Bert Layson, an unassuming Catholic priest usually found in a tank top, short pants, and flip-flops. He began his personal journey to inter-faith transformation by telling us about being assigned to the remote, predominantly Muslim Philippine island of Jolo in the Sulu Archipelago as a new priest, “because he was naughty” as he describes it. For nine years he served on this small remote island of 4,000 Christians in the midst of 600,000 Muslims.

During this time two things happened to shape his attitude towards the work of the Catholic Church and more specifically his order, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). First a destitute man approached him for aid, which he refused to offer, saying it was the government’s responsibility. Six months later Father Bert, after reflecting on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, “Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done to me,” had a vision on retreat of this destitute man’s face and Jesus’ face interchanged. He realized he had failed this man and Jesus.

The second formational event occurred when, after nine years in this Jolo parish, his beloved bishop was martyred. Father Bert began to hate Muslims for this act. But after a transfer to the Pikit Parish in Central Mindanao, and an almost immediate crisis of massive displacement of the Muslim communities surrounding his parish due to war, his attitude changed. “When you hear mothers crying and see families displaced, you don’t ask if they are Muslims or Christians,” he mused. So he set about providing relief to uprooted people, who were mostly Muslims, in his parish during four major displacements from 1997 on (1997, 2000, 2001, 2003). He says that “helping the poor is not a matter of choice for Christians, it’s a social responsibility.”

Through his humble service to the displaced in his parish, Father Bert has proven that he holds the basic principle of dialogue, which is “the belief in the basic goodness of every person, that is, the goodness of God.” He sees dialogue as “an integral part of the evangelism of the Church,” not in a narrow soul-winning way but in a holistic demonstration that “the Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church.” When asked how his mission is received by his fellow OMI priests, he laughs and says, “It’s difficult for priests to transcend their biases.” Indeed, Father Bert works tirelessly to change Catholic altitudes toward Muslims among his parishioners, by crossing social and religious boundaries and even by putting himself in harm’s way on the front lines of war in pursuit of peace.

I have made central Mindanao the focus on my work in the Philippines. Nearly two years prior to our Mennonite delegation visiting Father Bert, I was sitting under the trees with fighters from the Muslim secessionist movement, the MILF. I was with a group investigating breeches of the ceasefire between the MILF and the government. The MILF commander of the 105th unit and four field commanders were taking our questions. They quite freely stated that they “wanted peace” and indicated that they wouldn’t make any provocation because “It’s our people who get hurt when there is a skirmish.” “This is our land, our back yard,” declared the commander while sweeping his hand toward the beautiful rice fields, coconut groves, and bush land around us. “Why would we want war?” he asked. Good question, I thought later.

The Mindanao conflict, while looking religious, has its roots in land grabbing, resource stealing, and unjust treatment of the original inhabitants. Differences in religion are convenient places for the powerful to hang their prejudice while they exploit the conflict for their own ends. Part of any long-term solution to the conflict is education about the real cause of conflict.

Southern Christian College: Global Education for Service

Southern Christian College (SCC) in Midsayap is a United Church of the Philippines (UCCP) college committed to providing a global education to its students. As one of the larger denominations of Protestants, who make up nine percent of the population, its creative and visionary leadership have come from Dr. Erlinda Senturias. After having lived for years in Geneva working for the World Council of Churches, she returned to contribute toward development in Mindanao. Her commitment to nonviolent solutions for conflict includes helping to shape students' worldviews in ways that include inter-faith awareness and interaction.

Students attending SCC are required to do some cross-cultural education through interaction with the tri-peoples⁶ in Mindanao: Lumad (indigenous), Muslims, and Christian settlers. Other SCC programs include an annual Summer Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development Motivators (SIPDM), which was going on as we visited. This program brings ten youth from each of the tri-peoples together for education in peace, history, and peace building. Interacting for a month, these young people forge friendships that transcend their diverse backgrounds and the prejudice inherent to this diversity.

Our Mennonite delegation had several occasions to interact with SCC students, faculty, and the SIPDM youth. It is impressive how SCC has taken the dynamic context of its location and used it for a learning laboratory, one that engages local problems and challenges from a global perspective.

SIPDM participants used "a Culture of Peace" (COP) as the paradigm for their dialogue framework. When quizzed about what constitutes a COP, respondents varied in their answers. Some said that it is the "absence of colonization and oppression (neo-colonization from Manila) or a respect for others, dialogue, justice, and pursuing diplomatic solutions to conflict." Some recognized that a COP is inner peace. "You have peace when you

don't respond back to injustice with aggression." When asked "How do Maguindanaoan Muslims forgive as a community?," the response was that in Islam, adherents follow the leader; if the leader forgives, the whole group will. "Allah says, 'I love people who forgive,'" we were told.

For Muslims, though, a simple acknowledgment of wrongs, such as land grabbing by the Manila elite during the Marcos years, would go a long way. "We are not asking for all our lands back," said one Muslim youth leader. However, a Lumad community leader reminded the group that "one reason we lost our lands was from forgiveness and hospitality. Forgiveness is a tangible/concrete expression [of a] restored relationship." His meaning was that their graciousness had been taken advantage of.

Our Mennonite group was probing topics rarely raised by foreigners involved in the peace process, forgiveness and reconciliation. Correspondence long after this trip from someone in our discussions who personally experienced loss from war affirmed probing these aspects:

It was nice having your group during my summer class for a round table dialogue. I won't forget the inspiring thoughts shared that "every time we have sufferings and pains, let's ask Jesus to remove that spear in our backs," and I asked, "How many times shall we ask Jesus to remove the spear, given the dynamics of conflicts here in Mindanao?" It was a very emotional environment of dialogue that we had. I treasure that encounter in my heart.⁷

Muslim-Christian Friendship Produces Fruits of Peace

One fruitful inter-faith friendship that began during this Mennonite trip was between Dann Pantoja and Ustadz A.M. who works full time as director for a Mindanao university in its Muslim-Christian relations initiative. As Dann wrote later,⁸ "Our friendship began when the delegation met [Ustadz A. M., who is like a reverend among Muslims because he confidently quotes the Qur'an in Arabic whenever we exchange theological ideas].

He told me that his job and his mission used to put him and his family in a very fragile situation in the midst of his Muslim community. But he believes in peace, so he risked his life and the safety of his family. He regularly brings Muslim youth leaders on the university campus to talk with

Christian and Lumad youth leaders. The people in his region saw positive changes in the lives of their young people. Now, his Muslim community trusts and supports him, and protects him and his family. This developing Muslim-Christian friendship “exemplifies the divinely-arranged trust preparation among the hearts and minds of many Muslim religious leaders in Mindanao,” commented Dann.

The Mennonite delegation was invited to visit the community where Dann had been doing his immersion live-in during the previous months. The group paid a courtesy call to the mayor, Datu M., who, through a position of strength, has kept the peace in his town all through the last ten violent years. After walking the gauntlet of machine-gun-wielding military security forces bristling with grenade launchers, we were welcomed us into his office.

Dann Pantoja gave an example of Datu M.’s wisdom in strength by telling the story of how Datu M. ended a brewing *rido* (an inter-clan revenge feud) right in his office. Two families had come to him because family B had killed someone from family A. The mayor asked if family A was going to kill someone from family B in revenge. They answered an enthusiastic “yes.” Then the mayor asked family B, “If family A kills one of yours, will you kill one of theirs?” “Of course,” family B responded. The mayor said, “Each of you choose one to be killed, right here and now, so that this ends.” The families came to their senses and realized the futility of revenge. However, “It was only in the presence of the mayor’s overwhelming firepower that this kind of settlement could take place,” said Dann. “The mayor told me there would be lots of killing when I die,” as his overwhelming firepower that keeps *rido* in check will no longer be a deterrent to violence.

In the midst of this kind of political and social reality, a simple prayer opened up space that all the force at the disposal of the mayor could not open. Ustadz A.M. from SCC was invited into the meeting with Datu M. After the introduction formalities, both David Shenk and Ustadz A.M. prayed for Datu M. Because of that prayer, Dann said he

felt the respect of Datu M. and his support [for] my involvement with the Muslim youth group of his town. He kept mentioning me and that prayer event before his fellow municipal leaders. Because of that, my relationship with the town folks grew deeper.

You see, I planned and carefully tried to build trust between me and the Muslims, and it worked quite okay. But what happened through this unplanned prayer of David Shenk and [Datu A.M.] is something beyond what I could have imagined – a DEEPER TRUST from a Transcendent Source began! Thus, I expect more unplanned, divinely-provided trust-building events for me and the peace building teams who would come after me.⁹

“Is there something hidden in your presence here among Muslims?” Haron Al Rasheed asked us point blank. Datu B. chimed in: “A sword in one hand and Bible in another is what destroyed [the community] in Maguindanao. When we see white people, the first thing that pops into our minds is religious imperialism,” since this has been so much of their history with Christians. From those sour encounters “we [Bangsamoro] are looked upon as bandits and robbers by Filipino historians.” “As a Christian, there are three big mistakes to keep in mind,” said Ibrahim Bolono. “Betrayal to your purpose to God, betrayal to yourself, betrayal to neighbors.” These honest words were a gift from friends to challenge us to transparency and integrity in our intentions and actions.

Evangelicals Reaching Out to Religious Neighbors

With regard to their religious neighbors, evangelicals often resort to one of two extremes. As in many parts of the world, some of the Philippine evangelical community uses cloaked language and aliases to move into Muslim areas for covert evangelism. They take on “tent making” roles with the clandestine motivation of converting Muslims to Christianity. So, while some evangelicals are in the undercover conversion business, many who live as religious minorities develop a “circle the wagon” mentality.

When the church develops a myopic, survival-oriented, inward focus, it becomes oblivious and unconcerned about the welfare of religious majority around them, as if it’s waiting to be recognized or validated before reaching out to its religious neighbors.¹⁰ A “don’t care,” or worse, “they had it coming” attitude during times of strife communicates a distorted picture of the Gospel message.

In the coastal city of Cotabato, our delegation met with the staff of Al Hayat,¹¹ a Christian NGO seeking a third way between covert evangelism and outrightly ignoring their religious neighbors. Of Cotabato City's 200,000 population, only an estimated one percent is evangelical Christian. Most churches are small and stagnant in growth, and make very minimal effort in reaching out to their Muslim neighbors. In this environment, Al Hayat staff feel very lonely in their work and unsupported by evangelical church hierarchy. One of their programs is a Three-Year Peace and Development Project, in which they partner with five of the estimated forty protestant/evangelical churches in the city to do ministries of compassion. They offer community organizing, development strategies, and peace building in five barangays¹² in Cotabato.

It wasn't easy for Al Hayat community organizers at the start to gain acceptance in the barangays, since the communities feared being the object of conversion efforts. As the communities learned to trust Al Hayat staff, and gained from their training in leadership and transformation, Christian acts of service gave these people new and creative tools for addressing inter-clan feuds, among other situations. When asked about the spiritual foundations of their quest for peacemaking, an Al Hayat program staff member answered, "We show love."

A pastor, a partner in the peace program, sees the role of the church as "bringing Jesus to the community, not the people to the church." He continued, "God has the power to transform. We share the Gospel through deeds." In going to Muslim communities that make up part of Cotabato City, the pastor has been continually "surprised by hospitality" and says "we have tasted the goodness of what the communities have to offer." He himself is a product of an exposure trip organized by Al Hayat in attempt to dismantle the prejudice of pastors toward these communities, and to give them a first-hand look at the communities where they have church volunteers.

I met with N.C., an evangelical church leader, late one night at a coffee shop. He lamented to me that the Philippine evangelical leadership and mission community had received a series of threats by a zealous Muslim. He had heard about the Christian Peacemaker Team approach of working inter-faith in Iraq, and sought out MCC for resources to help him deal with this

kind of conflict. He had a desire to seek out ways to redemptively address this situation. I sent him a stack of peace building materials, especially the Mennonite Conciliation Handbook, which contains a significant section on the Christian theological basis for conciliation. He later thanked me and indicated that the materials were helpful as he was being called to mediate a contentious conflict situation.

Likewise, I was approached by a Muslim religious leader who expressed a desire for any materials in Arabic that would validate his working at peace. "My ideas for peace will gain much more respect if the materials I use and disseminate are in Arabic." I supplied him with a copy of an Arabic Conflict Resolution Manual that MCC Jordan sponsored for translation.

Our Mennonite delegation visited Alim M.¹³ in a restaurant in downtown Marawi City to hear a truly inspirational story of how he tries to promote peace building among his fellow Muslims. "Shifting from violence to nonviolence is difficult, because any little deviation from armed struggle is seen as a betrayal of the cause which many Maranaos¹⁴ have died for in the decades of struggle [against colonial powers]. Many believe the only solution is war."

As an Islamic scholar, Alim M. garners respect within his Islamic community. But his stand on peace has put that esteem in jeopardy. "I was banned in many mosques when I started this thing (peace building among Muslims). I need your (Mennonite) support. The Muslim peace movement needs Mennonite encouragement." MCC sponsored him to Eastern Mennonite University's Summer Peacebuilding Institute.

Through being a member of the Bishop Ulama Conference (BUC), Alim M. is part of a movement of Mindanao religious leaders and intellectuals who are reshaping religiously prejudicial attitudes. The BUC started as a forum in 1996 to discuss wide-ranging issues from theology to the security of Muslims and Christians in each other's areas.

Alim M. cites three practical outcomes of the BUC over the years. First, people realize religion has little to do with Mindanao's problems. Second, the BUC is a venue where issues are vented so as to present government with a unified voice for influencing its decisions. "We can urge

the government not to use force to solve security problems like kidnapping,” Alim M. comments. Third, the youth can be brought into similar assemblies. He warns, “We cannot rely on the government to sustain our attitude of good relations. We have to devise many NGOs to bring this to a lower level of the common people all over Mindanao and the Philippines.”

Reflecting on his peacebuilding strategy, Alim M. says that “we are telling government what we want to tell them without violence. Our friends in the jungle are speaking with arms. Conflict is part of nature, but we can resolve problems peacefully without using arms.” Gradually, he says, “people are recognizing that even through an individual Muslim and Christian have a fight, it’s not between their respective Muslim and Christian communities.”

I gained a new revelation on this sojourn that I had made the idea of Christian community too complex. Our delegation of five had evening debriefings from the interactions of the day. As we traveled, discussed, worshiped, and prayed together, our group of five became a community for the ten days we were together. Christ’s assertion in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” became scripture incarnate for us. We were living on the cutting edge of faith during this trip, trusting God and our friends for discernment at each step. This kind of temporary, task-oriented community can be transformational, I discovered, when set in the rich context of inter-faith discussions.

Silsilah: Inter-faith Conversations as Personal Transformation

On the extreme western tip of the mainland of Mindanao Island is a town called Zamboanga, the site of recent large US/Filipino joint military operations in the war on terror. By contrast, this city is also host to a quiet calling for peaceful inter-faith conversations through the work of Father Sebastiano D’Ambra, PIME [Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions], who started the Silsilah dialogue movement. Silsilah, literally “chain” or “link” in Arabic, aims to foster a dialogue of life where Muslims and Christians live among each other, respecting and caring for each other in community.

What this means is that Silsilah is not simply an NGO but an agent of transformation of lives from the inside out. A spiritual foundation is

essential, as evidenced by a Silsilah motto, “Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God.” So the movement uses the imagery of journey: “A journey becomes a pilgrimage when we feel God is accompanying us and we move to a holy place.”

Harmony Village is Silsilah’s idyllic retreat center where this vision takes practical shape. Amidst a beautiful piece of land overlooking the ocean, Father Sebastiano related to our Mennonite delegation how the property was a former camp for armed Muslim resistance in the area. Now the land is nurturing the vision of harmony, not only in the Zamboanga peninsula of Mindanao but in the whole of the Philippines. This tranquil fourteen-hectare campus has a clinic for herbal remedies, a preschool, a farm center, a House of Peace conference center, administrative offices, a mosque, and chapel.

We arrived just in time for the graduating ceremonies of the nineteenth summer basic course on dialogue. Eight Muslims, and 24 Christians of all stripes (diocesan and religious Catholic seminarians, one sister, seven lay leaders, and one evangelical) spent three weeks exploring the spirituality of inter-faith dialogue. Participants in the summer seminar are hosted by families who adopt them and take them in for weekend stays. Christian participants are adopted by Muslim families, and vice versa. Silsilah has more than 200 alumni throughout the country and is working to replicate this dialogical/learning/spirituality model throughout Mindanao and Luzon.

We Mennonites celebrated mass with the Silsilah community in the tranquility of the evening. It was clear that the quiet strength of the sacrament gives the Silsilah community renewal to continue their journey. They know suffering first hand. The martyrdom of one of their priests in 1974, and family members lost to inter-religious fighting, made the suffering Christ image on the chapel wall all the more poignant.

The four heavily-armed soldiers aboard the fast craft from Zamboanga to Basilan Island looked bored. I had some anxiety about traveling to the small island of Basilan, a half-hour boat trip from Zamboanga City. Basilan was where missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham and Filipina Ediborah Yap were held hostage for more than a year by the Muslim separatist group Abu Sayyaf in 2001 and 2002. As I learned later, I needn’t have worried. Since the Abu Sayyaf was chased off the island, there has not been much tension and danger of firefights.

A General Committed to Peacebuilding on a Troubled Island

Brigadier General R.F., a devout Catholic and newly-promoted army officer, is in charge of 1,500 army troops and 2,400 CAFGUS (citizen members of paramilitary groups).¹⁵ One of the army corporals on the fast ferry thought that General R.F. is “strict,” as the General does not allow any gambling, drinking, or involvement in illegal logging, a source of tension on the island. General R.F. sees his soldiers as peace keepers. As he says, “my troops are to be protectors of civilians, not part of the local problem of peace and order,” a documented concern. In the past the Philippine military has been co-opted by one side or the other in this conflict, and has thus become part of the problem.

General R.F. has trained all his soldiers in the Culture of Peace program that gives them skills at seeing past simplistic religious labels to becoming a constructive force in society. When asked if he met resistance in his peace efforts, he replied that “some officers think that the Culture of Peace will make soldiers not want to fight, but it is really more of values formation.” Practical results of his reforms are as simple as courtesy at checkpoints. “Before, the predominantly Muslim residents of the island use to fear harassment at the checkpoints. Now, I insist that my men show courtesy and respect,” he said. This translates directly into good will, and eventually into trust that the military is not an enemy but an enforcer of the peace. General R.F.’s attitude is that order and peace cannot be attained apart from the NGO community and civil society. So he is working actively at promoting relationships and cooperation between the military and civilians where he is stationed.

Sporadic war, skirmishes, and feuding have left deep scars on the population of Basilan. Father Angel Calvo, a Claretian priest who grew up in Basilan and has worked in the area most of his life, led our Mennonite group on a tour of the lovely countryside. Along the way, he pointed out the sites of ambushes, skirmishes, and battles. “The sadness of this place is that every corner has a history of tragic loss,” he said. “There is so much brokenness, yet the area is so rich and beautiful.”

Through the efforts of Miriam “Dedette” Suacito, a war trash project collects artifacts of war, such as bullet and artillery shell casings, and turns them into artworks. This project is particularly innovative, as it has a trauma

healing component built into it. Communities, Christian or Muslim, are approached to see if they are ready to give up old shell casings from small arms and artillery pieces – a symbolic release of the pain communities have held from the fighting they experienced. For some residents, the trash may be all they have left of a firefight that took a loved one, so turning it over is particularly difficult. The brass and steel are used to make candle holders and other artifacts to symbolize the turning of swords to plowshares. By working at trauma healing, the scars of past hurts are less likely to precipitate inter-communal violence in the future.

Synthesis

I hopped into a motorcycle trike, a common mode of transport in Mindanao, and headed for the bus station on my way home. Amidst all the colorful decorations on this three-wheeled jalopy were slogans, some rather raunchy but some inspiring. In my trike was the poignant command, “Exercise your faith walk” I was amazed at God’s little confirmation of the right path on this sojourn, for that is exactly what happened on the trip. I had the satisfaction of living at the edge of my faith in the spirit of a long line of MCCers, both in the Philippines and around the world, who moved, sometimes boldly and sometimes haltingly, toward the tension spots even though they put themselves in uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous positions vis-à-vis current geopolitics.

I named this article “Dialogue of the Feet,” since our conversations are practical. It is not a heady and academic work left to the theologians but a kind of action-oriented lifestyle that finds, in the daily, commonplace exchanges in our life, opportunities to build and cross bridges over the chasms that separate a broken humanity. In order to do so, we have cultivated values that orient the attitudes of the program, as noted below.

Relational Capital

On our sojourn we found that US Embassy and US State Department personnel had been to many of the places in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao just days before our Mennonite contingent got there. Since the US Embassy still has a travel warning for American citizens traveling to

Mindanao, we were aware that American envoys had been accompanied by heavily armed escorts of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The United States came with a show of strength through large deployment of troops and even helicopter gunships. Our Mennonite delegation went, unarmed, with trust in the relationships developed over the years MCC has worked in Mindanao. This tremendous relational capital gave far greater security in the volatile areas we visited, as we depended at each step of the journey on friendships and partnerships that had cultivated a deep level of trust. Mennonites saw their journey in Mindanao primarily within the relational context of building bridges of understanding, compassion, and peace, not as acts of statecraft. To this end, our human relationships included an element of vulnerability and the reciprocation of trust.

Learning Posture

MCC began its second round of presence in the Philippines shortly after the United States lost the war in Vietnam. It was at a time when many North American churches had not been very prophetic about the war's inherent evil. Former MCC Philippines Country Co-representative Earl Martin says that "Philippines taught us the church can be prophetic and working for justice." During the Marcos dictator years, with a heavy US military presence, the Philippine church remained prophetic to oppressive powers and compassionate to the oppressed.

In order for the West to regain a prophetic stance to state power, a posture of learning needs to be adopted. North Americans so often have a "we know best" attitude coming from winning world wars, putting a man on the moon, and being the surviving empire from the cold war days. This impediment often blunts the ability to hear the soft voices of our colleagues who can see, much more clearly, the relevance of the Gospel to current communal, national, and global realities.

Service as Visible Expression of Christ

Recently I had a chance to do some election monitoring in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. I, a Christian, was seconded through a Muslim NGO to a Christian poll-watching body to monitor a Muslim election in a predominantly Christian country. MCCers have rendered service to civil

society, whether the church or NGOs, that enlarges social space which resists the militarization of all things (relief, peacekeeping, law and order). Service, as Christians understand it, reaches out across the boundaries set by the state to those who may be considered enemies of the state. Works of compassion invoke the best of our own faith teachings, but may also urge the same from other faith groups we interact with. As a practical example, Filipino evangelical church leader N.C. has helped to organize and promote a “Bless the Muslim” day on September 11 in an effort to bridge the gulf between him and his religious neighbors.

Transparency and Transformation

Engaging in inter-faith conversation demands an air of transparency. Because of the dark history of Christianity riding on the coat-tails of western colonization, capitalistic greed, and nationalistic hegemony, Christians must be transparent with both themselves and others during inter-faith discussions. This transparency will demand an element of self-reflection. What are our motives? Why are we about inter-faith conversations? Is there something inherently transformational about the Gospel, for ourselves and the other, as we speak the message?

These kinds of questions, forced by the issue of transparency, move us into gray theological zones where the only way forward is more honesty with ourselves and others. Our answers to these questions will not come from our seminaries and theological think-tanks. They will come as we are honest with our uncertainties, take down our religious masks, and journey into our uncertainties. I have experienced a true seeing of the face of God as I walk with my religious neighbor.

Author’s note: Due to program prioritization, MCC closed the Philippines office in August 2005 and no longer has any direct programming in the Philippines.

Notes

¹ See Benjamin Baniaga and Helen Liechty Glick, eds., *Where Will They Sit? The Life and Work of Mennonite Central Committee in the Philippines* (Mennonite Central Committee, 2005).

² See <http://www.peacebuilderscommunity.org> for details of Dann's involvement in Mindanao.

³ <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/rp/People>

⁴ See Hilario M. Gomez Jr., *The Moro Rebellion and the Search For Peace: A Study of Christian-Muslim Relations in the Philippines* (Zamboanga City, Philippines: Silsilah Publications, 2000).

⁵ http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/rel_cat

⁶ The tri-peoples of Mindanao refer to the first people (called Lumads), the Muslims who came later, and the Christians, usually settlers from Luzon and the Visayan Islands of the Philippines.

⁷ Dr. S. Y. S-A, 27 October 2005 e-mail to author.

⁸ E-mail of 21 October 2005: Response to questions in Gordon Janzen's e-mail.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ I have seen this phenomenon throughout Asia where the church is a minority, more specifically in Nepal, India, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

¹¹ Meaning "the Light" in Arabic.

¹² A barangay is the smallest unit of local government in the Philippines. It is equivalent to a village.

¹³ An "Alim" is a learned scholar in Islam.

¹⁴ The dominant clan in the Lanao area of Mindanao, who take pride in never being subjugated by foreign powers.

¹⁵ Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs), paramilitary units made up of local citizens but under the command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), are trained as soldiers and stationed near their homes to "protect" their communities.

Jon Rudy is MCC Asia Peace Resource Volunteer.

Peter Dula and Alain Epp Weaver. *Borders and Bridges: Mennonite Witness in a Religiously Diverse World*. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007.

This is a little book that packs a lot! It contains accounts of the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in non-Christian contexts around the world that describe the reasons Mennonites are found in inter-faith relationships, and the nature of inter-faith bridge building in specific contexts.

Here one will encounter examples of being missional, peacemaking praxis, cultural and religious histories of a variety of countries, information about some world religions, and insights into how MCC approaches its work. The essays explore the implications of MCC's written policies that stress a commitment to work through local administrative and Christian structures in the settings they find themselves called to serve in, with a current strategic initiative (2006-2010) to engage in "interfaith bridge-building."

The authors narrate MCC's collaborative involvements in inter-faith contexts over many years that demonstrate the imperative to listen to the beneficiaries of programs and to work within the understandings and priorities of the communities one serves, and the enriched nature of service undertaken collaboratively with other Christians and partners of other faiths.

One reads how service workers listen to the beneficiaries, and how and where inter-faith bridge building is occurring in the act of living amidst one another. Is such bridge building a specific set of orchestrated activities, or a by-product of relationships formed amidst service and development work? The stories recognize the multi-layered nature of such a question, and suggest that the answer to it is both.

This book is full of implied missiology. It rarely engages explicitly in theological theory, with the exception of Peter Dula's essay at the end. A theology of presence is assumed, as is a theology of serving those in need, regardless of creed or culture. The relational nature of these ecumenical and inter-faith encounters presupposes a shared humanity (which is not to say we all ultimately believe the same things). The stories imply that theology is lived and walked, whether or not it is systematically explored and written out. It reveals a relational theology – the notion that Christian faith is to be

embodied in the way we live in relationship to other people, Christian and non-Christian. These relationships are a part of our relationship to God.

These essays, coupled with Dula's reflection, encourage the reader to consider that Jesus can be met in places and people beyond the church, dogma, or Scripture. This book is a gem for the pastor and congregation seeking to better understand multicultural relationships they are encountering in their home communities. It can help North American communities to know more about their newly immigrating neighbors, but it also provides models of how to create community together.

This volume offers numerous examples of "gift exchange" between Mennonites and various Christian communities as well as with those of other religious expressions. The relationship imperative shines through, begging us to recognize the way Mennonite witness, even in its particularities, is part of the ongoing witness of the church universal (123). MCC has long had a policy of working within existing church structures in any given country, "in-grafting" ourselves into established churches. These stories show how the involvements of Mennonite service workers in situations of non-Christian faith communities requires, and facilitates, the ability of Mennonite Christians to work directly at building Christian unity too.

Administrators in mission or humanitarian development agencies will benefit greatly from these accounts of how MCC has interacted and developed programming in a wide variety of contexts. From the story-telling approach one can see what worked and what did not as various MCC personnel sought to listen to, and accompany, those they wished to serve. This book addresses complicated issues around how sustained relationship building is consistently important in programming, while asking what shape of program architecture and infrastructure is needed to facilitate it. There must be the capacity for programs to intentionally create space for relationships to take root and grow.

"In almost all of the essays in this volume, the authors highlight MCC's emphasis on long-term, personal relationships with partners and beneficiaries. MCC has usually insisted on long-term relationships with respect to development and peacemaking – these essays show that it is just as important for interfaith bridge building" (168).

Susan Kennel Harrison, PhD Candidate, Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology

Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007.

Is it possible to write a book about evangelism in the 21st century with virtually no reference to “techniques,” “strategies,” “target audiences,” and “seeker-friendly worship?” You can if you are Bryan Stone and believe the church has been largely seduced by its own history and surrounding culture, and needs to take a hard look at what it means to “be the church” as a “new and distinct society,” a “new and unprecedented social existence” in today’s world (16).

Stone believes the time has come to recover and reconstruct the “ecclesiological foundation” of evangelism. The church is in and of itself “evangelism,” the witness to God’s reign in the world. This is true, according to the author, because the body of Christ “constitutes both the public invitation and that to which the invitation points.” Consequently, “the church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church *is* the evangelistic strategy” (15).

Such is the argument set forth in the Introduction and in Part 1. In Part 2 Stone bolsters his position by retracing the biblical story of God’s people through the history and calling of Israel, the ministry and message of Jesus, and the birth and apostolic evangelism of the early church. Part 3 addresses in considerable detail what the author calls “rival narratives”—the Constantinian story and the story of Modernity, with all their accompanying “dead ends, detours and derailments” (113)—stories that have sadly subverted and ultimately distorted beyond recognition the church’s understandings and practices of what true evangelism might and should look like.

Stone presents the case in Part 4 for “the evangelizing community”—a community formed by the Holy Spirit through the core practices of worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing, present in and offered to the world in such a distinctive way that it can be “touched, tasted, and tried” (21). One can, in fact, “only ever be *drawn* to the reign of God,” he claims, “by first encountering it in the world embodied in the life and work, patterns and practices of the church” (267).

Some readers, unaccustomed to this type of church-centric approach to evangelism, may find themselves a bit disoriented, if not downright scandalized, by the author’s central thesis. Other readers, including many Anabaptist-Mennonite ones, will find themselves on more familiar turf and

will quickly recognize the influence and perspectives of John Howard Yoder and other like-minded scholars scattered throughout the text.

In fact, the works of Stanley Hauerwas and Yoder appear in larger numbers than any others in the book's footnotes and bibliography. Stone even includes a "John Howard Yoder" subsection in his Introduction, where he asserts that "any evangelism that seeks to be fully post-Constantinian rather than merely free of the embarrassing shackles of Christendom will [...] have to engage Yoder seriously" (21). And "engage Yoder seriously" he does, so much so that he suspects some readers may find his book to be "little more than a gloss on Yoder's thought or, at points, an introduction to his theology of evangelism ..." (22). Stone's thesis, whether inspired by Yoder or others, is nonetheless a timely reminder of the church's role as primary model and messenger (or "paradigm" and "pulpit" in Yoder terms) of God's reconciling plan for the world.

The author also helpfully insists that, contrary to many evangelistic methods employed by the church today, "the gospel is not something that can be tossed at others at a distance, shouted out by megaphone, or beamed in by satellite; it must be made available in bodily form so that it can be tested and tried" (285).

While Stone's central thesis on the embodiment of the gospel is an important corrective to much that is called evangelism today, the author paints himself in a corner by becoming categorical and overstating his case. Is it really true that "evangelistic witness is *impossible* apart from a Spirit-created social body" (311, my italics)? I don't think so. There are simply too many ways over the years that people have been drawn to faith, and too many locations around the world where the church is growing but where Christian witness and body life are restricted or forbidden, to make this claim.

However, Stone's book makes an important contribution to understanding the post-Christendom world in which the church today seeks to live and share its faith. It is a dense but essential read for any church leader seeking to "relearn the practice of bearing faithful and embodied witness" (21).

James R. Krabill, Senior Executive for Global Ministries, Mennonite Mission Network (Mennonite Church USA)

John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr. *Listening to the Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; Ronald J. Allen. *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship/Content/Feeling*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharaz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen. *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005; Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen. *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006.

These four works present findings from a project on how sermons are heard, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment through the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Two hundred and sixty-three lay people (ethnically diverse) from 28 churches (denominationally diverse – including Anabaptists) who regularly listen to sermons were interviewed about what they find engaging or disengaging in preaching. Each of the above books “slices the data differently” from this one massive study.

Listening to the Listeners looks at six full interviews (five individuals and one small group) conducted in this study. For instance, we get to listen at length as an AME African-American man and a Caucasian Anabaptist woman respond to specific questions on preaching. Alongside their responses is a column of commentary that interprets and connects the responses in light of larger homiletical, theological, and churchly issues. There are interesting surprises as each person is “heard out” on what they actually hear in a preached sermon. Individuals from various ethnic backgrounds and denominations – while having differing views and expectations – value preaching, and use remarkably similar language to say so.

Readers who like the case study approach will gain much from this slice of the data. The summary chapters and the appendix show excellent examples of how congregations can conduct and interpret their own interviews on preaching.

Hearing the Sermon pays attention to how parishioners process sermons. Aristotle’s rhetorical categories of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* are used here

to show how listeners hear in distinct ways. The researchers were surprised at how respondents listened to sermons primarily out of one of these three modes.

Some parishioners were engaged in a sermon mainly because they knew, loved, and respected the preacher (*ethos*). These folk speak of “connecting” with a sermon or a preacher and use relational language, regardless of what kind of question is posed. An equal number of parishioners were captivated by a sermon based on its biblical or theological content (*logos*). These listeners “think through” the sermon and are impatient when the preacher takes a long time to get to “the point” or keeps rambling on after it is made. Another almost equal third of respondents were engaged when feelings were elicited by a sermon (*pathos*). Those whose mode of processing is that of pathos speak of what “moves” or “touches” them in the sermon.

These three types of listeners are represented by extended transcripts from respondents plus commentary from psychology, rhetoric, and theology. The message is clear: one style of preaching (i.e., narrative preaching that gives its nod to *ethos* and *pathos* but little to *logos*) will not cut it over time.

Throughout each chapter and especially in the last one, the authors show how the three modes can be woven together in the preached sermon. Appendices list the questions asked and provide handy charts related to *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in preaching.

Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons, the longest of the four volumes, treats the data in ten clusters revealing the range of ideas that arose in the interviews. Here we get a glimpse into the diverse views of parishioners on certain aspects of preaching.

One issue has to do with challenge and controversy. There was clear, widespread support for pastors who tackle controversial issues. At the same time there were diverging views on *which* particular issues should be dealt with and *how* they can best be treated from the pulpit. Researchers found that listeners were not interested simply in topical sermons or some treatment of the topic *du jour*: what they fervently desired was honest grappling with theology and biblical texts as they relate to life.

Other areas that respondents saw as central included the role of God, scripture, and emotion in the sermon. Also, they were interested in the role that the sermon plays in forming the individual and the community. Affirmed throughout this book is the reality that while listeners view the purpose of preaching in sometimes divergent ways, they do care deeply about preaching and see it as central to Christian life and worship.

Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity could be called “the listeners unplugged.” The twelve chapters in this volume correspond to twelve qualities that listeners mentioned which helped them to engage with the preached word.

The chapter titles succinctly spell out each topic in the imperative. For instance, “Make the Bible come alive” and “Show how the gospel helps us” place the Bible’s role at the forefront of preaching. Chapters such as “Speak from your own experience,” “Make it plain,” “Keep it short,” “Walk the walk,” and “Talk loud enough so that we can hear you,” relate to how preachers live, move, and have their being in and out of the pulpit. Preaching that relates to tough issues is emphasized in “Talk about everything,” and “Don’t oversimplify complex issues.” Two chapters deal specifically with the listeners’ desire to be in relationship with God. “Help us to figure out what God wants” is a call for preachers to keep God central in their sermons.

These chapters are more dense and nuanced than one might suppose from the titles. For instance, “Keep it short” hardly comes from a desire for “theology light” or a desire to get out of church early. Many listeners in this study were smart enough to know when preachers are filling in the sermon with more than is needed. Many were also aware that when preachers slovenly throw together their sermons on Saturday night, the results tend to be long and tedious. Editing takes time – but what happens is that more is said in fewer words.

The chapter entitled “Speak from your own experience” is hardly an endorsement of endless stories from the pastor’s life. As one parishioner warned, “Don’t go to the well too often.” In other words, preachers often do have powerful, appropriate, and helpful stories from their deep well of experience, but going there too frequently (even once per week) turns

the sermon into an exercise in ego rather than a preaching of the gospel. Preaching out of deep experience can be conveyed without constant reference to oneself.

At first I was skeptical of this entire project. As a preacher of the gospel, am I not beholden to what God would have me say, as opposed to “tickling the ears” of the congregation? Listening to the listeners might get me a hearing, but am I compromising the gospel by giving people what they want?

Thankfully, these questions are met frankly in several ways in this study. The authors stress that the preacher is not giving away theological integrity by listening to the listeners. What this study offers is just one – albeit comprehensive – way of listening to what people are hearing when they hear the sermon. One of the authors puts it something like this: With the obligatory handshake at the end of the service, preachers so often hear “That made me think,” or “That sermon moved me,” and sometimes “Nice sermon but I really don’t need all the stories.” Following up with the parishioner is one way to handle such brief comments.

With this study and its four books, the preacher gets to hear 263 parishioners explain why they say what they do when they shake the pastor’s hand. And the preacher gets to hear a slice of what the silent individuals might say if we asked the right questions. In these volumes we also get to hear some of North America’s finest scholars of preaching reflect, both in the body of the text and in the endnotes and numerous appendices, on what is being said by listeners in the context of larger theological and practical issues.

Many works stress that preaching actually starts when the preacher shuts his or her mouth and just listens. Listening to the biblical text, to the rhythms of God in the world, and to the individuals and congregations we serve is crucial to preaching that is both engaging and faithful to the gospel.

These four books – I would start with *Make the Word Come Alive* and see where it leads – allow the preacher to simply stop and listen.

Allan Rudy-Froese is a doctoral student at the Toronto School of Theology.

Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton. *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching gets to the core of the task of preaching, and therefore deserves to be read and studied by everyone who preaches. For many of our churches, preaching is most fundamentally the act of bridging the gap between the ancient text of “long, long ago” and the lives of contemporary listeners “here and now.” Often in worship services a scripture passage is read, and then this reading is followed by a sermon that serves as a commentary to help listeners better understand what the passage meant in Bible times, what it means in our times, and how we might apply it in our lives.

I suppose it is trite to say that the times are changing, but the fact is that they are not only changing, they are changing rapidly. Thus the task of helping the scripture speak for our modern congregations is even more urgent. *In Other Words* engages the Biblical text that serves the task of preaching in beautiful and inspiring ways.

In case anyone thinks preaching has not changed, chapter one outlines some of the major changes in preaching over the last centuries and decades. This chapter serves to strengthen the writers’ case for what follows, but it also helps the reader see that preaching does change and that new thoughts about preaching are needed. Often we think of context as related to different places or people, but in this volume different times are added to the important context list.

Chapter two takes us to the book’s core teaching, helping us understand “incarnational translation” for preaching. Incarnational translation includes concerns of the original text and the contemporary context. What would the text sound like had it been written to our contexts? That is the incarnational translation Cosgrove and Edgerton want to help preachers be able to prepare as part of preparing to preach. Incarnational translation speaks to many of the changes mentioned in chapter one. Every preacher will be motivated to understand the need to find the rich fiber that is in the biblical text.

The center section of the book works with major genres of the scripture texts. Chapter three focuses on the Psalms, hymns, and oracles. With analysis and examples we are shown how incarnational translations

might be applied to such texts. Chapter four analyzes story and the role of story in scripture. The authors include examples of passages from both Testaments to inspire our own writing and sermon preparation.

Chapter five looks at law and wisdom with the same beauty and energy that we experience with the other genres. In each chapter there are enough examples to encourage readers to create their own translations. Chapter six concludes the book with a thorough and useful discussion of the hermeneutics involved in preaching. I use the word “discussion” because of the question and answer format employed in much of the chapter. Cosgrove and Edgerton ask the questions that need to be asked, even if we might not have thought to ask them.

Incarnational translation is first and foremost a hermeneutical process, one that every good preacher engages in every time he or she preaches. Granted, not everyone who reads this book will need a review in hermeneutics, but I welcomed it and felt a renewed energy to have a careful understanding of hermeneutics after the lively examples given in the earlier chapters. The authors include in the discussion circle hermeneutic theorists such as Paul Ricoeur and others. In this collaborative way I too felt included in the circle.

The incarnational translation to which this volume invites us is a genuinely creative process. We are invited to listen to the text and its meaning, whether in Hebrew or Greek or English or whatever, and then find a way to create a new translation in the language and images of our listeners’ time and place. It is helpful to contemplate how much we live in a time of translation. The preacher may know Hebrew and Greek, but most of our listeners do not, so it is all about translation. In incarnational translation we are urged to embrace the task – and to begin the walk of creative faithfulness to the meaning of the ancient text.

June Alliman Yoder, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

Ron Austin. *In a New Light: Spirituality and the Media Arts*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

As befits Ron Austin's artistic vocation and temperament, *In a New Light* is more provocative than explanatory. In less than 100 pages, it contains much to ponder. Written first for filmmakers seeking to live out their faith in a challenging environment, the book "explores a spiritual foundation for creative work" (viii) and offers much that applies to many of us. Yet its incisive explorations are so laconic that they seem more an outline of a larger work that we wish (hope) Austin will write.

Ron Austin has worked for more than 40 years as a writer and producer in Hollywood, and his experience shows in both his technical expertise and the wisdom that comes from longevity. As he writes, "I'm not a theorist; I'm a survivor" (vii). His spiritual foundations include "three principles, common to all the faith traditions": being in the present moment, affirming the mystery of the other, and transforming conflict (1).

The author references Simone Weil, Martin Buber, Eastern Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Zen Buddhism, but this is no scholarly treatise. "The best of filmmaking is a kind of revelation made possible by an attentive 'seeing in the moment,'" he says, "but it also requires a willingness of the creative artist to risk and suffer along with the characters" (5). Then he stops.

Austin combines practical advice with underlying principles. For example, in discussing the writing of good, authentic dialogue, he points out that "truthful characterization is doomed by a lack of forgiveness" (8) and that at the heart of dialogue is "the mystery of ourselves as found in the Other" (9). The author explores more fully the third principle, transforming conflict. Yet even here he offers insights with little explication. He writes, "The turning point in the process of transforming conflict into drama is invariably the revelation and acceptance of our own contradictions" (11) and leaves the reader to work out the implications.

Austin also addresses the question of evil and how to portray it in one's creative work. Art "is not a shortcut to virtue or wisdom" (14). In telling stories that confront evil, we should do so "on our knees" (14). He goes on to consider the work of René Girard and Gil Bailie regarding

ritual sacrifice and violence. For the filmmaker or writer there are only two narrative options for resolving conflict. The more popular option, which goes back to ancient sacrifice rituals, is to assign a community's sin to a scapegoat (hundreds of movies illustrate this, from war films and westerns to police dramas and science fiction). The more difficult one is "for us to be made aware of our own complicity in the sinfulness and delusion of the protagonists" (17).

The book's longer middle section presents "a brief spiritual history of film." While admittedly not comprehensive (Austin limits his list of directors to Europeans, plus two Americans), his history includes Dreyer, Chaplin, Renoir, Fellini, Bresson, Bergman, Truffaut, Tarkovsky (*Andrei Rublev*) and Kieslowski (*Red, White, Blue*). Film buffs will appreciate this section, though perhaps arguing about names Austin omits. It also ignores the rich contemporary cinema from around the world. The author lists over 100 20th-century films he recommends. Moviegoers used to popular cinema may feel lost amid the foreign films or wonder how to access them. (From personal experience, Netflix is one way to see most of them.)

In a brief third section, "Spiritual Frontiers," Austin discusses our need for transcendence. The search for the transcendent, for a deeper level of meaning, "mandates [...] changes in the creative process" (73). One such change is making the filmmaking process more collaborative, what he calls "shared attention" (74). He illustrates this in an appendix describing "an experiment in unity" (85) that became a full-length feature, *Blue in Green* (www.blue-in-green.com). This project began with a simple story idea, an all-night party. The actors were encouraged to originate their characters, and the dialogue was wholly improvised. It became "a unique merging of directors, writers, cinematographers, editors, actors – and a poet" (86).

Another appendix includes Austin's personal reflections on faith. He writes, "If we seek in our work to 'enter into the Other' with respect and wonder [...] we will find the Christ dwelling within us" (82). The author offers much wisdom not only for artists but for all of us trying to live out our faith in a world of contradictions. This book leaves us wanting to hear more from him.

Gordon Houser, Associate Editor, *The Mennonite*, Goshen, IN

Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul G. Doerksen, and Karl Koop, eds. *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honor of A. James Reimer*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007.

On the occasion of A. James Reimer's retirement, his friends, students, and colleagues wished to recognize the thought and work of this prominent Mennonite theologian. The result is *Creed and Conscience*, a collection of sixteen diverse essays. Many of the essays are expansions of key theological concepts of Reimer's, while others are either inspired by conversations with Reimer or simply dedicated to him.

The collection is divided into six sections. The first, "Biographical," contains a biography of Reimer that outlines his intellectual and theological influences and development. The second, "Engagement with Scripture," focuses on the current debate around homosexuality, same sex marriage, and the church, approaching the issue from a biblical standpoint. "Engagement with the Anabaptist Tradition," the third section, contains discussions about catholicity and holiness, and about Pilgram Marpeck and natural law. The fourth, "Engagement with Modernity," provides a reading of Thomas M ntzer as a quasi-Marxist revolutionary, as well as an exploration of Freudian and Jungian psychologies of religion and ethics alongside Mennonite thought, including Reimer's.

The longest section is the fifth, "Engagement with the Ecumenical Tradition." Several essays focus on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while others explore the relationships between the Creeds and ethics, worship, interdenominational dialogue, and Christian witness. The final section, "Political Theology," asks questions about Martin Luther's two-kingdom theology, the secular nation, and the positive and negative aspects of several Anabaptist political theologies, such as John Howard Yoder's and Reimer's.

Whether or not the reader is familiar with Reimer's theology, this volume provides an apt summary of his wide-ranging interests. John Rempel's succinct biography of Reimer is especially helpful in providing context for the discussions that follow. That the essays cover everything from current issues, such as homosexuality and the church, to the sixteenth-century Reformation, and to age-old challenges for the church, such as ecumenism and political theology, is a testament to the impressive – or even intimidating! – scope of Reimer's work.

To its credit, the collection does not blindly praise Reimer but ends on a challenging note. In his essay “Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology,” Paul G. Doerksen daringly critiques both Yoder’s and Reimer’s political theologies, pushing Reimer and other Anabaptist theologians to delve more deeply into the political aspect of their faith and tradition.

Beyond the core issues, however, the essays in *Creed and Conscience* are a powerful account of the very different people Reimer has influenced and connected with over the years: Mennonites (both proud and critical), Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans all make their appearance here. Nearly all the essays include a personal anecdote about Reimer; Rudolf J. Siebert goes so far as to call his contribution “Our Friendship,” and in her psychological/theological essay, Christina Reimer writes about growing up with Reimer as her father and role model.

Creed and Conscience is also a cross-section of discussions among current Mennonite theologians, many of whom contributed to this volume. Several essays stand apart in either their excellence or their limitations. Jeremy M. Bergen’s “The Publicity of the Holy Spirit,” Karl Koop’s “Holiness, Catholicity, and the Unity of all Christians,” Harry J. Huebner’s “The Nation: Beyond Secular Politics,” and Lydia Neufeld Harder’s “Theological Conversations about Same-Sex Marriage,” are especially insightful reflections, often containing critiques of the Mennonite tradition while lauding its strengths. In other cases, the reader cannot concur with the critique of Mennonite theology, as it is too strident, condescending, and generalized.

The book’s organization into six sections is somewhat unhelpful, as the essays are too disparate to be categorized, even under such general headings. Nearly half the essays are in one section, leaving the other sections hungry; the essays could be left to stand on their own without the larger sections. Also, several essays overlap in content, while other aspects of Reimer’s work remain untouched. One can only wish Reimer’s conversations with Muslim theologians had received more than a passing mention in the Preface; surely this would have enriched the collection even more.

Creed and Conscience fittingly celebrates Reimer’s many contributions on both academic and personal levels, and provides a largely balanced taste of his wide range of interests and diverse personal connections, while

outlining the broader conversations within his Mennonite denomination and beyond. Readers familiar with Reimer's theology will appreciate the deeper explorations of some of his ideas, while others will find this volume a mostly accessible, helpful introduction to his thought and to Mennonite theology in general.

Susanne Guenther Loewen (BA '07, Canadian Mennonite University)

Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos. *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Making Wise the Simple calls Christians to "engage the entire Bible" as a "rich source for Christian faith and practice" (xix). This is the appropriate response to the Holocaust and centuries of anti-Semitism among Christians, who have often supported their prejudice by (mis)reading the Bible (xviii-xix).

In the introduction, the author expresses many of her own perspectives on the interpretation of the Bible. Her reclamation of the Torah (the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses) by Christian readers articulates the approach of feminist biblical criticism within a "confessional arena" (xix). In order to provide a context for interpretation, Van Wijk-Bos contends that we contemporary readers must "establish and evaluate the distance between us and the text, between our world and their world," which manifests itself in terms of "cultural, social, and economic aspects as well as [the Bible's] religious practices" (xx). Thus she states her belief that the Bible is not "without error" but that "a redemptive word from God [can] be found here" (xxi). She writes for those who share her conviction and have "[the] courage to ask disturbing questions of the text" (xxi).

The book is divided into five main parts: The Torah in Bible and Tradition, The World of the Torah, The Making of a World (Genesis 1:1-11:32), The Making of a People (Genesis 12:1-Deuteronomy 34:12), and Living with Torah.

Part 1 presents Jewish and Christian understandings of "Torah" and the people of God as articulated by the related texts of Exodus 19:3-6 and

1 Peter 2:9-10. The author concludes this part with an introduction to the treatment of strangers in the Old Testament.

Part 2 discusses the historical and cultural background to the interpretation of the Torah in its ancient context, although it mainly focuses on the final form of the text stemming from the postexilic period. This is both a strength and a weakness; the author attends very well to the concerns of these texts *as they were being read and used* at this later time, but she does not consider many of the implications for her readings if the texts originate from an earlier time. For example, she relegates the violence of many narratives to the postexilic period, which she terms a “time [which manifested] a need for identity, a desire for order, and a perspective on the world as ‘filled with violence’” (118). As a result, she can dismiss them as later additions or inferior reflections. But can these beliefs be found only in the postexilic period? Certainly not; they appear throughout the material preserved in the Old Testament, from the earliest times to the latest.

This dismissal of “inferior” passages or concepts appears at several points. For example, Van Wijk-Bos rejects the relevance of the interpretation of Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 rather quickly – in less than one paragraph (125). Similarly, in the context of discussing the stipulations for sexual relations in Leviticus, she advocates the validity of same-sex partnerships in a few short sentences without explaining her reasoning (227).

Parts 3 and 4 address the narrative story contained in the Pentateuch and the major themes of the covenant made by God at Sinai. Part 5 discusses the characteristics of God (Who Regrets, Who Appears, Who Accompanies, Who is Prejudiced, Who is Passionate), and finally the move to the New Testament, especially in terms of Jesus and Paul on the interpretation of the Torah.

While the author raises serious questions about the way Christians have used or ignored the Old Testament, she presents an uneven treatment of the issues, narratives, and stipulations of the Pentateuch. Her point that the concern for the stranger in the OT must be brought more fully into conversation with the ethics of the NT is valid and necessary (300-305). However, her presentation often fails to convince as a result of her inconsistencies and lack of arguments.

The book will certainly assist readers in delving into the Pentateuch, but they should view it as a place to begin the process of thinking about these issues and to find additional resources (many listed in the fine bibliography) for further reflection.

Steven J. Schweitzer, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

Donald E. Miller, Scott Holland, Lon Fendall, and Dean Johnson, eds. *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories from African Peacemakers*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, co-published with World Council of Churches Publications and Herald Press, 2007.

This book collects presentations made at a gathering of approximately 90 Historic Peace Church (HPC) people – Church of the Brethren, Friends (Quakers), and Mennonites – in Kenya in 2004. The meeting was planned as a follow-up to an HPC conference at Bienenberg, Switzerland held in 2001.¹ Both were organized in order to respond to the invitation to HPCs from the “Decade to Overcome Violence” of the World Council of Churches to contribute to the work of this special WCC emphasis.

These conversations are the latest in a series of interactions between the Peace Churches and WCC dating back to its founding in the late 1940s. While the Church of the Brethren and a number of Friends groups have been members of the WCC, historically most Mennonite churches, with the exception of German and Dutch groups, have not been.

Nevertheless, North American Mennonites have long been engaged with the WCC, especially regarding questions of peace and nonviolence. Mennonites from Europe have been particularly involved with the Decade to Overcome Violence. This WCC initiative owes its existence to the German Mennonite theologian Fernando Enns, and the major staff person for the Decade is Hans Ulrich Gerber, a Swiss Mennonite.

What is most striking about this book in comparison with past Peace Church contributions to WCC conversations is that it speaks to the issues primarily with African voices, rather than Western voices. Its existence is

evidence of and testimony to the emergence of large numbers of Christians, including Peace Church Christians, in Africa.²

We owe the book's editors and the conference planners a debt of gratitude for making these voices available to us. The desire to give voice to those who have not been adequately heard is reflected in the structure of the book, which has more than 40 short contributions.

Contributors come from each of the three Peace Church groups, from close to a dozen countries in Africa, and from a handful of countries outside the continent. Inclusion of such a broad group of contributors offers the reader an opportunity to touch many of the varied faces of Africa, though at the cost of more sustained analysis.

The book's major sections (into which the essays do not all fit equally well) deal with the heritage of the Peace Churches, the many forms violence takes in the African context, initiatives that HPCs have taken to respond to violence, and HPC efforts at public peacemaking; and a concluding section of meditations that focuses on hope amid violence.

The book's tone is less scholarly than most previous HPC contributions to WCC conversations; most writers are not academics but church leaders or practitioners close to the ground. The subtitle "*Stories from African Peacemakers*" is reflective of most essays in the volume. And the medium of stories is an excellent – even essential – way to communicate convictions about Christian faith, especially about Christian peacemaking. It is perhaps especially apropos in African contexts. It works well. Authors tell stories from their countries and churches, and especially from their personal experiences. The stories are frequently stories of suffering and conflict, but also of courageous and innovative initiatives for peace.

Especially striking to me were accounts of Christian/Muslim conflict in Nigeria and the joint efforts of Christian and Muslim leaders to restore peace. Stories about the need for forgiveness and trauma healing after seasons of catastrophic violence (e.g., Rwanda and Burundi) – and examples of such forgiveness and healing – provide both motivation and models for peacemaking. My impression from this book is that while Peace Church missionaries generally did not bring to Africa a gospel that has peacemaking at its center, African Peace Churches are now both eager to learn more about a theology of peacemaking and in the forefront of discovering how to

embody it. If so, there is much to be grateful for.

Seeking Peace in Africa does not plow new intellectual ground. Rather it brings new voices into an ongoing conversation. It does so in a way that is accessible to readers who would like to know what shape peacemaking questions take in contexts radically different from those we face in North America. And it points to some creative and sometimes dangerous answers.

Notes

¹ Materials from the Bienenberg meeting are contained in *Seeking Cultures of Peace: A Peace Church Conversation* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, co-published with World Council of Churches Publications and Herald Press, 2004).

² By 2006 Mennonite-related Christians in Africa already outnumbered Mennonite-related Christians in North America. Alemu Checole et al., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*. (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, co-published with Pandora Press, Kitchener, ON, 2006), vii.

Ted Koontz, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

Call for Submissions

SOUND IN THE LANDS II

Mennonite Music Across Borders

A Festival/Conference of Mennonites and Music

June 4 - 8, 2009
Conrad Grebel University College
Waterloo, Ontario

Sound in the Lands II is both a festival with multiple concerts, performances, and workshops, and an academic conference with papers and presentations addressing issues of Mennonite-rooted peoples and their music-making locally and globally.

Sound in the Lands II seeks to expand musical horizons, integrating global, cross-cultural and newer fusion of music with more familiar Mennonite traditions. As voices converge we may find vibrant exchanges that help redefine "Mennonite music" today. "Borders" refers both to geographical and cultural borders and to those of style, genre, aesthetics, and other diversities.

The emphasis will be on musical and cultural dialogue, including a wide array of musical genres and exchanges. As well, we will sing together in four parts and more, a cappella and with all manner of instruments!

Proposals are invited from composers; instrumental and vocal (classical) performers; singer/songwriters, jazz, folk, pop, alternative performers; academics; musicians interested in presenting workshops; and writers, dancers, and visual artists.

Deadline for submissions: February 1, 2009

Send written proposals (500 words max.) to Carol Ann Weaver: caweaver@uwaterloo.ca.

Composers/musicians: send scores and/or recordings by surface mail to:

Sound in the Lands II, Conrad Grebel University College,
140 Westmount Rd. N., Waterloo, ON N2L 3G6 CANADA.

For more details on the event and how to submit your proposal,
visit <http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/soundinlands.shtml>.