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Cover art image supplied by Chad R. Martin, author of the Reflection that appears in this issue.

Foreword

In this issue we are pleased to offer the 2011 Bechtel Lectures, the 2012 Eby Lecture (an Eby lecture was not presented in 2011), an Article, a Reflection, and a wide array of book reviews.

A word about the Lectures may be in order here. The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000 by Mennonite churchman Lester Bechtel, seek to make the world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the academy and the church. Featuring distinguished scholars and leaders from across North America and around the world, these lectures enable representatives of various disciplines and professions to explore topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history, identity, faith, and culture. The Eby Lectures, named for Benjamin Eby, a prominent early Mennonite church leader and educator in Waterloo Region, offer the College's own faculty members a similar opportunity to share research and reflections with the wider community. CGR is proud to continue the tradition of bringing the latest available presentations in both these lecture series to the attention of our readers.

* * * * *

We announce, with regret, that Hildi Froese Tiessen, Professor of English and of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, and the well-known animator of Mennonite/s Writing conferences from their inception in 1990, is concluding her role as Literary Editor with this issue. For more than fifteen years she has ensured that Literary Refractions – works of creative writing that contribute to “the negotiation of meaning and the modification and construction of tradition in the Mennonite world” – and attention to the arts in general fully share in this journal's mandate and commitment. While she is stepping down officially from CGR, we are glad to report that she will be the guest editor of an upcoming issue on Mennonite Writers.

Jeremy M. Bergen
Editor

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THE 2011 BECHTEL LECTURES

“There was no one here when we came”: Overcoming the Settler Problem

The 11th annual Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were given on March 17 and 18, 2011 at Conrad Grebel University College by Professor Roger Epp. Introducing the speaker on both occasions was Henry Paetkau, President of the College. In his remarks before the first address, Paetkau suggested that the audience would be “embarking on a journey these two evenings that probes Anabaptist/Mennonite identity and relationships. . . . I expect we will be taken into what, for many of us, may be somewhat unfamiliar, perhaps even uncomfortable territory, both literally and figuratively.” He recalled learning about treaties in high school and had come to think of them as defining relationships. “The dictionary defines ‘treaty’ as a noun,” he observed, “but there is the rare instance when ‘treaty’ is used as part of a compound moniker, as in ‘Treaty Indian.’” Paetkau added that “I have been called a variety of things in my life. As a German-speaking person born in Paraguay to Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union, that has included terms like ‘square head’ and ‘DP’ (Displaced Person), not to mention ‘Russian Mennonite.’” But, he said, “I don’t recall ever having been described, or defined, as a ‘treaty person’, never mind thinking of myself in those terms. So I’m particularly interested in what I might discover this evening!” The next evening he said the first address had reminded him of the cartoon character Pogo’s famous words, which he paraphrased as “We have met the problem, and it is us!” He briefly highlighted key points made in that address, especially “the history in which we are entangled,” our desire for “absolution by amnesia,” and the impact of “the cultivation myth.” He spoke for everyone in acknowledging how much the speaker had given them to consider and ponder — something that was true of the second address as well.

THE 2011 BECHTEL LECTURES
“There was no one here when we came”:
Overcoming the Settler Problem

Roger Epp

LECTURE ONE
What is the ‘Settler Problem’?

Entangling History

In the cold wintry weeks of January – with these lectures very much in mind – I took part in two solemn, sacred gatherings. One of them was an aboriginal round dance on my home campus. I will have more to say about it later. The other was my uncle’s funeral in Saskatchewan. He was lowered to sleep with his ancestors in the historic country cemetery at Eigenheim, the oldest continuing Mennonite congregation in the Canadian northwest. My father is buried there too. It is sacred ground, our family’s compass point, though most of my generation did not grow up there. *Eigenheim* – literally, a home of one’s own – was the name given to the district in which my paternal ancestors were among the first settlers. They came from Russia after a successful scouting trip. They accepted the geographic order of the dominion government’s square survey grid, more isolating than the old country villages, but they filled its spaces with gathering places and outlandish German names filled with desire: *Frieden*, *Hoffnung*. My grandfather was among the first babies born in the community. My great-great grandmother, Judith Epp, the family matriarch in North America, was among the first to be buried in the Eigenheim cemetery. A handsome column rising straight above the January snow still marks her grave.

Historian Frances Swyripa, in a new book, *Storied Landscapes*, describes the significance for settlers of such “places for the dead” – her words – “where the certainty that they would rest apart from their ancestors, their bones being literally part of a new land, drove home the finality of their

decision to uproot and relocate.”¹ The European settlers’ cemeteries, their churches, schools, and halls – and the names they gave them – claimed, defined, and “storied” the landscape in familiar terms. But, Swyripa adds, with gentle understatement, that “[n]ewcomers often failed to realize that western landforms had aboriginal names that told stories, explained the universe,” and oriented people’s travel. This displacement of names was not so much a matter of conquest as it was the sense of absence: “In fact, the words settlers used to describe the West – empty, virgin, alien, unpeopled – ignored the indigenous presence as they set about . . . claiming this space as their own.”² This is the point at which Jacqueline Baker begins her novel *The Horseman’s Graves*, set in a German Catholic immigrant community tucked up against Saskatchewan’s Great Sand Hills. Her narrator observes that by the time the settlers arrived, “the ghosts that had once walked the hills had vanished or were, at least, imperceptible to those already burdened by the past of another country.”³ For ghosts, think stories: the formative stories, sometimes unspoken, that tell us who we are, who is “we,” who is not, and what to fear.

From the Eigenheim churchyard it is less than 25 kilometers due north to Fort Carlton, the Hudson’s Bay Company provisioning post on the North Saskatchewan River where in 1876 – only 18 years before the Epp family arrived – Treaty 6 was negotiated and signed in the presence of Cree lodges. It was at Fort Carlton in 1885 that the Cree leader Big Bear, one of the early holdouts, surrendered to the authorities who had had been looking everywhere for him as one of those responsible for the Métis and Cree uprisings. His show trial and imprisonment quickly ensued.

From Eigenheim in 1897, it was possible to hear the cannon fire across the river to the east, directed at the poplar bluff where the alleged Cree cattle thief Almighty Voice was captured to be hanged at Duck Lake – a story, at once, of hunger, daring, and settler fears. From Eigenheim, it was not far to the corner of the closest reserve that had been set aside for the Willow Cree people. But it may have been too far to hear the small dramas that preceded

¹Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2010), 44.

² Ibid., 45.

³ Jacqueline Baker, *The Horseman’s Graves* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007), 1.

the departure of generations of children for the residential school, most likely in Duck Lake.⁴ The Mennonite settlers had troubles enough of their own. In his fine history of the Eigenheim congregation, Walter Klaassen writes that the Cree “were on the fringes of our life and consciousness.” Contact was incidental or else instrumental: peddling firewood, hiring out at harvest-time: “The two communities have lived side by side for a century, but no lasting bonds have been developed between them to this day.”⁵ His observation can be read either as an indictment, softened just enough to fit into a congregational history, or as an expression of regret, or simply as a neutral statement about the kind of near-solitudes so characteristic of newcomer-aboriginal relations in North America.

In my family history, the most dramatic story of side-by-side isolation is one I began to tell in an essay that appeared in its first form in *The Conrad Grebel Review*.⁶ The story began with two grandmothers remembered in the intimacy of long, unbraided hair. The first was the writer Scott Momaday’s grandmother, as he described her in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, his account of the Kiowa of southwestern Oklahoma. The other was my maternal

⁴ St. Michael’s Indian Residential School in Duck Lake (1892-1964) was one of more than 100 operated across Canada between the mid-19th century and the late 1960s as a partnership between the federal government, with its interest in assimilation, and both Catholic and primarily the major Anglo-Protestant denominations, for which the schools were an extension of missionary activity. The last school was closed in 1996. Indian, Métis, and Inuit children were often forcibly removed from their families and home communities, and typically were forbidden from, among other things, speaking aboriginal languages in the schools. Many also experienced physical, emotional, and, in some cases, sexual abuse. In 1998 the federal government made its first formal statement of regret and “offer of reconciliation,” including compensation, which a successor government in its 2008 apology (see fn. 12 below) reinforced in much more precise language. Church bodies have also issued various apologies in recent years. Among standard histories see J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996); John Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1999); and Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1988).

⁵ Walter Klaassen, *The Days of Our Years: A History of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church Community, 1892-1992* (Rosthern, SK: Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1992), 28.

⁶ “Oklahoma: Meditations on Home and Homelessness,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 61-69. An expanded version is found in my *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 2008).

grandmother as I remembered her, missing Oklahoma, the place she had been a girl, the place she and her family and her future husband left in 1918 and 1919 for Canada, for Eigenheim, in the face of war and the local nativism unleashed under its respectable cover against German-speaking pacifists, native Americans, socialists, and others. My family had settled in Washita County, if “settled” is the right word for a quarter-century, in the land rush that followed the redistribution of tribal lands in the name of civilization, progress, and individual property. Here my great-grandfather Jacob Klaassen came with his brother, lived with his livestock in a sod shack, and built the impressive farm about which he had dreamed in the watermelon fields of southern Russia. Here he grieved a wife, an infant daughter, a son crushed beneath the loaded grain wagon he was driving – all of them buried in the country cemetery of the Herold Mennonite Church, where he was also an ordained preacher. Here he grieved, not least, to leave for Canada, to join his sons but to live thereafter as a stranger.

This family story is set in the same small part of the world into which the Cheyenne, like the Kiowa, had been compressed after a series of post-treaty brutalities. They included the massacre at Sand Creek inflicted by Colonel Chivington’s Colorado Volunteers in 1864 and then the surprise attack in 1868 by General Custer’s Seventh Cavalry along the banks of the Washita River, where the Cheyenne peace chief who had received President Lincoln’s flag and medal was among those killed. I did not know, however, how small a world it was – or why I couldn’t let go of these parallel stories of displacement – until our family drove to southwestern Oklahoma one summer. This was scarcely a mainstream vacation destination. It was in the county museum in Cordell, north of the courthouse where a hostile judge routinely sent Mennonite boys to military prison – my grandfather’s cousin, indeed, was shipped home dead from Fort Leavenworth, wearing the uniform he had refused in life – that I found a county map dated 1913. It was full of surprises. Within two or three miles of the river, the map is a checkerboard of alternating Mennonite and Cheyenne landowners. Among the latter, there was also a familiar name. White Buffalo Woman was a girl in 1868 when the Seventh Cavalry attacked the Cheyenne camp. Her description is an important part of the oral history of that event. In 1913 – though I still cannot say beyond doubt it is the same person – White Buffalo Woman is

listed as the owner of two 80-acre blocks of land. One runs alongside the river. The other borders my great-grandfather’s farm.

That discovery gave new clarity to the understanding that the story of my family in North America could not, and should never, be disentangled from that of the Cheyenne or the Cree. I am a product of Indian policy on both sides of the 49th parallel. I am a treaty person. Like my grandparents and parents, I have lived most of my life on Treaty 6 land in Saskatchewan and Alberta. For reasons I cannot really explain, it has been given to me to ask what it means to live where I do as the descendant of settlers, what sort of inheritance and obligation, what sort of thinking and acting, it entails.

The Settler Problem

In these lectures, I want to do that thinking in a way that is mindful of their location and the very contemporary local conflicts over land and treaties along the Grand River in Ontario. In approaching this subject, it is necessary to be tentative but not timid. Perhaps “humble” is a better word than “tentative.” For one thing, I am out of place in southern Ontario. I know only what I have read about Caledonia, the Haldimand Tract, the two-row wampum.⁷ For another, I am acutely aware that the very mention of those words – or other words like “aboriginal,” “treaty,” “land claims” – will likely evoke weariness or anger or guilt in any Canadian audience.⁸ Why can’t we

⁷ In 1784 Governor-General Frederick Haldimand, representing the Crown, issued a proclamation granting land along the Grand River for the settlement of Haudenosaunee/Six Nations people following the American Revolution, in which they had fought alongside the British. While the legal status of the proclamation and subsequent land transactions remains a matter of contention, and the subject of numerous claims, large portions of the tract have been opened to non-Six Nations settlement – including Mennonite settlement – starting at the end of the 18th century. The most recent flashpoint has been a housing development in the community of Caledonia that prompted an occupation and eventually compensation paid from the provincial government to homeowners. One scholarly historical account from a Mennonite perspective is E. Reginald Good, “Lost Inheritance: Alienation of Six Nations Land in Upper Canada, 1784-1805,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 92-102.

The two-row wampum is a traditional purple-and-white beaded belt rooted in the Haudenosaunee diplomatic protocols that Europeans once had to learn in order to conduct relations with an important political federation. The belt signifies a relationship based on principles of friendship, peace, and respect between peoples who are distinct – hence the two rows – yet woven together by agreement.

⁸ For a sense of non-aboriginal impatience around the Caledonia situation, see journalist

just put the past behind us? Why can't we just all be Canadians? It is hard to find a fresh approach to the subject that encourages rather than polarizes or paralyzes its audience.

So it is necessary for me to begin personally, by locating myself and my inquiry in terms of particular places and stories; it is important not to tell stories that are not mine to tell. Above all, I do not want to participate in the patronizing talk that has offered various solutions to what Duncan Campbell Scott, the poet-bureaucrat who was Canada's Deputy Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs in 1920, famously called the "Indian problem."⁹ My interests lie instead in what I have called the "settler problem" and in the complementary claim – one I have borrowed for a book title – that in this country we are all "treaty people."¹⁰ The latter phrase has become familiar, if still provocative, in parts of the prairies. I first heard it in a classroom 15 years ago from a middle-aged aboriginal woman. Like it or not, she said, we are all treaty people. She meant it as something other than a statement of solidarity. Rather, it is the right we exercise by living where we do. It is the history in which we are entangled, though not, of course, in the same way or with the same need to remember it.

Christie Blatchford's *Helpless: Caledonia's Nightmare of Fear and Anarchy, and How the Law Failed All of Us* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2010). Newspaper excerpts and promotional appearances by the author in late 2010 had served to rekindle and polarize public discussion in the months prior to these Bechtel Lectures.

⁹ See Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1986).

¹⁰ While my publisher and I have a certain investment in this phrase as a book title, I am aware that it is not free of contention in some aboriginal circles. Taken literally, it may be perceived as excluding Métis peoples, who generally were denied treaty and therefore fall outside the relationship it implies. Additionally, some First Nations elders insist their treaty relationship is with the Crown, not their settler neighbors. Both concerns are a reminder of the limits of language. But note that historian J. R. Miller has made the case that we must all recognize ourselves as treaty people – as participants in and beneficiaries of treaties – in the conclusion of his *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2009), 306, 309. The same phrase is used to promote the work of the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan, established by agreement between the Government of Canada and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations to work independently to advance land entitlement agreements and public education. See, e.g., the Office's video, accessed on June 12, 2011 at www.otc.ca/WE_ARE_ALL_TREATY_PEOPLE/.

If we are all treaty people, what is my work, our work, to do? In part, I have proposed, it is to reverse Duncan Campbell Scott’s powerful act of verbal displacement and ask: What is the settler problem? In that inquiry, in other words, we become the subject under scrutiny. The question is no longer about what “they” want – land, recognition, compensation – and therefore what “we” can live with. Instead, it is about what Taiaiake Alfred calls the “colonial mentality, moral indifference and historical ignorance”¹¹ that stand in the way of a different relationship. It is about the stories we tell ourselves. It is about the fears and emotions so close to the surface.

In a new book, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan takes up the same problem. She writes: “The singular focus on the Other blinds us from seeing how settler history, myth and identity have shaped and continue to shape our attitudes in highly problematic ways. It prevents us from acknowledging our need to decolonize.”¹² Regan has served as Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which was established by the courts as part of the settlement in a class-action lawsuit brought by residential-school survivors and supporting groups.¹³ It is safe to say the Commission is unknown to most Canadians. Its work in hearing and archiving the stories of residential school survivors may have gained profile at least momentarily as a result of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s formal apology in 2008 for the abuses suffered and perpetrated. That apology was itself surprisingly frank and unequivocal. Judging from the reactions of aboriginal people, it was received for the most part as genuine and powerful. It said that the burden of what survivors had experienced – above all, the state-sponsored, church-delivered attempt to strip peoples of their languages and cultures by taking their children out of their communities – needed to be borne by the Government and the country, and the attitudes that inspired the residential school system had “no place” in contemporary Canada.¹⁴

¹¹ Taiaiake Alfred, Foreword, in Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 2010), x.

¹² Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 11.

¹³ For information on the Commission, see www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3.

¹⁴ Government of Canada, “Statement of Apology – to former students of Indian Residential Schools,” June 11, 2008. www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/rqpi/apo/sig-eng.pdf.

Regan's point, though, is that the apology did little to "transform the settler," or to reverse the "rush to put the past behind." She wonders why Canadians had known so little of this history – or had "selectively forgotten it" – even while they lived alongside of its survivors, and therefore whether they can consider the apology as a genuine opening to "rethink our past and its implications for our present and future relations."¹⁵

The settler problem in this formulation shows itself as what another scholar has called a "longing for oblivion – for the luxury of forgetting . . . for the absolution of amnesia."¹⁶ All this is true, I think, and the consequence is that our own past is not fully available to us. We are afraid of it, or afraid of the contention it invites. But so far we have not gone far enough in our inquiry, and we are unlikely to have moved those whose reflex is to resist. It is natural enough that outcomes should be framed in terms of settlements and resolution when so much of the aboriginal-settler relationship is now, often by political default, mediated by the courts. Arguably, the residential school story has elicited a certain degree of empathy among Canadians – enough for the current government to have made the apology it did. Canadians could understand something of the harm inflicted, even while worrying about how much financial compensation would follow.

Land and land claims, however, are a different matter altogether. Here the longing for closure, the willful amnesia, is embedded more profoundly in the mythology and legal fiction of *terra nullius* – no one's land – whose grip on the colonial imagination has been renewed as opportunity in every settler generation. If anything, that grip has tightened with the passage of time and the realities on the ground. It is unthinkable, threateningly so, that the status of land ceded once and for all should be placed in doubt by peoples thought to have been safely quarantined and destined for obsolescence. There is no issue more volatile in this country. Why?¹⁷

"In the beginning," wrote the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke, "all the world was America."¹⁸ In this crude political creation myth, the

¹⁵ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler*, quotations at 42, 6.

¹⁶ Keavy Martin, "Truth, Reconciliation, and Amnesia: Porcupines and China Dolls and the Canadian Conscience," *English Studies in Canada* 35 (March 2009): 61.

¹⁷ The next several paragraphs offer a condensed version of the argument made in the title essay of *We Are All Treaty People*, esp. 127-35.

¹⁸ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*. 1690. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), ch. V, para. 49.

case for limited government and private property rested on a social contract that had delivered some of our ancestors from a state of nature that was either barbaric, insecure, or merely inconvenient because it left us to enforce our own justice. Locke’s America signified the world before government and property, though it bore little resemblance to reality. It was a philosopher’s thought experiment, a singular developmental anthropology that needed a primitive state against which to make its point. In that developmental story, the justification for property was efficient use – that is, cultivation – so that God’s creation, given in common, could meet human need most abundantly through the work of appropriation from nature and then trade.

There is a direct line to trace from this state-of-nature story to the arguments made in 18th-century international law: namely, that the “wandering tribes” who “roamed” North America’s “vast tracts of land” – more than they could ever occupy or “use” – had no right to keep it to themselves. They could be confined legally to smaller tracts.¹⁹ Versions of this intellectual argument are still made. Professor Tom Flanagan, for example, has claimed that the march of civilization is marked by two characteristics: first, the rule of organized states over stateless societies and, second, the displacement of hunter-gatherers by cultivators. The last act of this great civilizational drama, as he puts it, is “the spread of agriculture around the world.”²⁰ The fact is that the first planters in the Americas, if we accept this hierarchy – and I should add that western ranchers never have – were not Europeans. Not even close. And on this St. Patrick’s Day we might note that it was the indigenous peoples of the Andes, not the Irish, who gave us the potato in multiple varieties through the application of practical knowledge.²¹

The settler mythology, however, is more powerful and ideologically attractive than any corrections proposed by historians. For it has continued to offer something more profound: a “sacrament of innocence,”²² a “new world,”

¹⁹ Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, or the Principles of Natural Law*, 1758. Trans. Charles Fenwick (New York: Oceana Publications, repr. 1964), 7, 81, 207-09.

²⁰ Thomas Flanagan, *First Nations, Second Thoughts* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2000), 39.

²¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), esp. ch. 9.

²² Sheldon Wolin is particularly insightful on the attraction of social contract theory – memoryless, dehistoricized – as it has been shaped in the North American experience. See

a fresh start, a clean slate, and a justification of hard work. The mythology is much the same in Canada, in South Africa, in Israel – wherever settler people say, “There was nothing here when we came, and we made something of it.”²³ *Terra nullius*. Empty land. Vacant, uncultivated, unproductive. Somehow lacking or incomplete. Frances Kaye has made the provocative point that homestead settlers in the American and Canadian west saw the land as “deficient” and “felt entitled to reclaim [it] from deficiency.”²⁴

An important theological dimension is common to the settler mythology as well. While the Government of Canada may have recruited many thousands of immigrants to the prairie West for the material purpose of export grain production, accommodating to that end the desire for ethnic-religious bloc settlements, versions of the idea of “new Jerusalem” were quickly projected onto the region by many of those communities: “covenant people establishing the Kingdom of God in virgin country.”²⁵ The biblical story of chosen-ness, exile, and deliverance has been ready to hand in European settler societies. The peoples of God do not identify with, or play the part of, the foot soldiers of Assyrian or Babylonian colonization. They are those who take possession of what is promised or restored to them. The Mennonite story from the 16th century forward is one of migrant peoples who themselves did not fit easily into the religious and geopolitical imperatives of early modern Europe. For all that, their resettlement often followed closely and unproblematically on another people’s dispossession. In North America, however, they did not necessarily need to be outsiders in the project of cultivation so long as the land and its productivity were to be wrested not from the nobility but, or so it seemed, only from nature.²⁶

his *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), esp. chs. 2 and 8.

²³ Trevor Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song: Promise and Peril in the World of Grassland Birds* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 226. Herriot’s point is that the story that there was no one here when we came and we made something of it involves a lingering, parallel disrespect of aboriginal peoples and of the land itself.

²⁴ Frances W. Kaye, *Goodlands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* (Edmonton: Athabasca Univ. Press, 2011), 5.

²⁵ See, e.g., B. G. Smillie, ed., *Visions of the New Jerusalem: Religious Settlement on the Prairies* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983); quotation from the editor’s introduction, 2.

²⁶ See also the essay, “Statues of Liberty: The Political Tradition of the Producer,” in *We Are All Treaty People*, esp. 78-80.

On the Sunday morning that our family worshiped in the Herold Mennonite Church in Washita County, Oklahoma, beside the country cemetery where my great-grandmother lies, the preacher’s text was the promise in the book of Joshua that the land would be given to those delivered from oppression in Egypt. There was no one here when we came, and by hard work we made something of it. That’s what Canadian thinker George Grant called “the primal spirit of North America.”²⁷ That’s the settler problem.

For all its power, though, the simple mythology of emptiness and entitlement is confounded by the reality that aboriginal peoples are still here. It must continue to obscure the complex entanglements of history as they are threaded through places and families,²⁸ and to discount the small acts of cooperation and coexistence that happened wherever real settler and aboriginal communities lived side-by-side. Correspondingly, the retrieval of those entanglements and small acts is itself a step beyond the settler problem. They make it possible to imagine a different reconciliation than mere forgetting.

It may help you to know, for example, that the young Almighty Voice not only risked his life to cross the South Saskatchewan River at spring breakup to bring food to the desperately poor Mennonite Emilia Wieler and her children, living on a homestead well beyond the circle of her “own kind,” but also that she fed him, a fugitive, when he stopped at her cabin.²⁹ It may help to remember similar acts of reciprocity along the Grand River in Upper Canada (Ontario) between Six Nations people and Mennonites, each displaced there by war. And it may help to know, in shifting from the

²⁷ George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).

²⁸ Among the best of entangling personal histories is Vernon Wishart’s *What Lies Behind the Picture? A Personal Journey into Cree Ancestry* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2006). Wishart, a retired United Church minister, chronicles the “family secret” of his Cree lineage that came to light only after his father’s death. I have also been privileged to receive and read a powerful, entangling work of creative non-fiction by Naomi McIlwraith, “*Nitohta anohc. Nākatohke. Now Listen. Listen Hard: A Creative Study of Nehiyawewin, the Plains Cree Language, and the Reasons for its Preservation*” (M.A. thesis, Department of English and Film Studies, Univ. of Alberta, 2007).

²⁹ This fascinating story is told in two parts by Carl A. Krause, “A Woman of Stamina and Courage,” and “Emilia Wieler and Almighty Voice,” *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*, April 2007, 21-24; July 2007, 15-17.

historical to the contemporary, how unremarked it was that on that bitterly cold morning at the Eigenheim cemetery, three of the grandsons who carried my uncle's coffin from the hearse to the grave were aboriginal.

“There was no one here when we came”: Overcoming the Settler Problem

Roger Epp

LECTURE TWO The Stories We Tell Ourselves: A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness

Uncommon Ground

The second solemn, sacred gathering in which I participated in January 2011 was a round dance, the first ever at my small university campus on Treaty 6 land in Alberta. It was part of our centennial celebrations. The previous fall I had presented tobacco to an elder, a former student of mine, to ask whether he would oversee the ceremonies and protocols. He agreed. A stickman was selected – two, in fact – to orchestrate the dancing. Word went out to singers and drummers across the prairies. Our food services staff agreed to make bison stew, biscuits, and a blueberry dessert for an indeterminate number of people. Donations were collected for the “giveaway” dance – one of those recklessly generous, redistributive social practices, like the potlatch, that would have elicited bureaucratic and missionary disapproval at another time in history. The eagle feathers were ordered through official channels for a special part of the evening.

Late on the Saturday afternoon of the dance, the fire suppression systems were turned off in the building as negotiated, and a smudge-fire was lit in the gymnasium. The elder took charge. He said a blessing, took the pipe, and passed it around a circle that included university leaders, the mayor, the local member of the legislative assembly, some staff and students – aboriginal and not – as well as several residents from the federal corrections healing center located on the First Nation where the elder is responsible for cultural programming. By the elder’s preference, only men were allowed in the pipe circle. When the pipe had gone around, it was time for the feast. Hundreds lined up to eat.

Inside the building, the smell of sweetgrass began to permeate. Outside, volunteers watched the fire built partly to warm the skins of the

drums. And the people came: from up the street, from other campuses of the university, from communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The singer Susan Aglukark, who has become an important mentor to our students, was there. She was one of two Inuit present. The other was a graduate returned from Iqaluit, capital of the territory of Nunavut, in ceremonial sealskin skirt, vest, and boots. Because this was a centennial year, we had made a special invitation to aboriginal alumni to return for the round dance. We had not kept such a list before. It turned out to be surprisingly long, reaching back to the 1950s.

At one point in the evening, the dancing stopped and several elders came on stage as planned. I called forward by name those who had earned degrees in the decades before we adopted the new University of Alberta practice of having an elder present an eagle feather to each aboriginal graduate at convocation. The feather honors not just the achievement of a degree but the hard work of living in two cultures to achieve it. The powerful emotions in the faces and bodies of those who walked across the stage to receive their feathers told the truth of that hard work. I will never forget it. And then the recipients formed a semi-circle on the floor, the elders said a blessing, an honor song was sung, and the dancing resumed. By our best estimates 1,000 people came together that night – young and old, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. There were some 60 singers and drummers, an impressive measure. At midnight they stopped for the customary bologna sandwiches. At 2 a.m., the gym emptied, the singers lined up for their payment, and an efficient clean-up crew went to work.

For that long night our campus had become what literary theorist Daniel Coleman calls *uncommon ground*. Not common ground. Not middle ground. Uncomfortable, risky, unsettling, transformative ground. For Coleman, uncommon ground is the space and the metaphorical space on which the familiar is disrupted and participants must pay close attention; we cannot simply colonize or “import the signs of the Other into our existing frameworks in order to find value in them.”¹ In other words, uncommon

¹ I am indebted to Daniel Coleman, professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, for this phrase and the model of his own “placed” scholarship in relation to what he calls “two-row consciousness.” His idea of uncommon ground is elaborated in a manuscript, “Beyond the Book: Reading as Public Intellectual Activity,” written for a collection of essays

ground disorients and transforms us. It calls for new words to describe what we have come to know.²

A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness

In these lectures I am examining the settler problem – the sense of entitlement, indifference, and ignorance rooted in the mythology that there was no one here when we came – that is still powerfully at work in the resentment and guilt attending the reality that the aboriginal peoples are still here with fresh cultural confidence and historically-grounded claims to press. This is the dangerous tendency in all the important talk of reconciliation and apology: namely, that even honest admissions are about the desire for closure, not the hope of relationship.

But I have not come here to stand on a prophetic soapbox. I will not speak in the idioms of theology or even social justice – the latter with its impatience to put the world right. Rather, I want to encourage those of you who live alongside the Grand River to be seized by the practical hermeneutic imperatives of doing so.

What do I mean by this? For a start, it is probably necessary to liberate hermeneutics from its usual application to texts in theology and philosophy. A practical hermeneutic imperative arises from the following conditions: first, the recognition of enduring differences; second, the unavoidability of face-to-face encounters between those who represent that difference; and third, the need to understand them – not defeat or dismiss them – in order to live well in a particular place. In other words, the hermeneutic imperative is intensely local. Like the work of apology and reconciliation, it cannot be delegated as a matter of proxy; there is only so much that national political leaders can do. It is on a more local scale – often where the tensions and

in development under the title *The Public Intellectual and the Culture of Hope*, eds. Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam. See also his “Imposing subCitizenship: Canadian White Civility and the Two-Row Wampum of the Six Nations,” in *Narratives of Citizenship: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples Unsettle the Nation-State*, Aloys N.M. Fleischmann, ed. (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta, 2011).

² This point is not so different from the one Charles Taylor once made against an earlier generation of social scientists in “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

risks are much higher – that the work of imagining an uncommon space is also most real, most urgent, and most meaningfully undertaken. At the local level, too, platitudes and romanticized caricatures frozen in time cannot be sustained for long in the face of everyday life.

The hermeneutic imperative starts with honest human encounters, not with policy or justice or high drama. That is my ordering. The first step outside the settler mythology is to be a neighbor, not an advocate. It is to build relationships, not to propose a solution. You don't enter into relationships to fix a problem or find a solution; you do so because you share living space, because you might learn things and enjoy someone's company. Put another way, it is better to know aboriginal people than to know about them.³ Where such relationships exist, the courage to stand alongside people will come when it is needed.

Another prairie example will illustrate what I mean. Stoney Knoll is the high point in a triangular tract of land – close to 80 square kilometers – situated along the North Saskatchewan River, west of the village of Laird and the first Mennonite settlements at Eigenheim and Tiefengrund. The land had been set aside under the terms of Treaty 6 as Young Chippewayan Reserve No. 107, though the band, in its adaptation to a post-buffalo economy and a leadership succession, did not take up continuous residence there.⁴ In 1897 the federal government took back the land without the consent required in

³ I owe this point to a lovely essay in creative non-fiction sent to me by an undergraduate student from another campus and a community where racial tensions are often raw. He had read my essay "We Are All Treaty People." He wrote about his clandestine Grade 6 visits after school to the reserve.

⁴ I am grateful to researcher Leonard Doell at MCC Saskatchewan for materials relating to the Young Chippewayan claim and the 2006 gathering at Stoney Knoll. His own involvement dates back at least to the 1980s. See "Young Chippewayan Indian Reserve No. 107 and Mennonite Farmers in Saskatchewan," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 165-67; and, earlier, "Call to support Indian land claims in Saskatchewan," *Mennonite Reporter*, January 7, 1985. The gathering is documented in a short video produced as part of MCC Canada's Indigenous Works project, "A Mennonite Reserve . . . Within an Aboriginal Reserve," accessed on May 23, 2011 at <http://mythperceptions.ca/more%20myths/mennonite_reserve.html>. The regional weekly newspaper also provided extensive, positive coverage at the time. See Rod Andrews, "Historic gathering at Stoney Knoll leads to signing of Declaration of Harmony and Justice," *Saskatchewan Valley News* August 30, 2006, 1; and "'We are all Treaty People,'" 2. Note that the precise place reference varies. Stoney Knoll is sometimes known as Stoney Hill or Stony Hill.

the Indian Act, and made it available instead to Mennonite and then German Lutheran immigrant homesteaders. Members of the Young Chippewayan band were relegated to the status of squatters in other communities. Their dispossession, however, was a persistent source of grievance. In the 1970s, the intention to reclaim the land was communicated in threatening tones to local residents, sometimes by young Cree who drove onto farmyards. Provincial First Nations leaders began to raise the matter of “stolen” land with the federal Minister of Indian Affairs. The response was fear and disbelief. There was no one here when our ancestors came; this was empty land, and we made something of it.

I do not know the full story of the next 30 years. For our purposes, though, it came to a decisive point – not an end, not an attempt at closure – on August 22, 2006, 130 years to the day after the signing of Treaty 6 downstream at Fort Carlton, when settler and Cree descendants gathered on Stoney Knoll for a pipe ceremony, a feast, and the signing of a Declaration of Harmony and Justice. *We are all treaty people*, they said. Together, they committed to work so that the Young Chippewayans’ claim for a land base could be resolved and future generations could live in peace, justice, and sufficiency for all. That is, they made uncommon ground – all those who gathered on the hill, erected the teepee, prepared the food, smoked the pipe, eased nervousness with gentle humor, told stories, exchanged gifts, and gave thanks to the Creator. In the eloquent words of one participant:

We settlers are unsettled on our own land. We don’t know the language. We don’t know the liturgy. But we recognize the love, the respect for land. . . . The prayers, the drums, the singing, carry us into the day. Two communities . . . step over risk and embrace stories, losses, strength and dreams. . . . Hope is in the hearts and hands of those who chose to set their chairs on this hill on this day.⁵

Another participant, Barb Froese, a pastor who also farmed with her husband at the base of the hill, presented a Mennonite Central Committee quilt to the Young Chippewayan chief and his wife. In doing so, she said: “Many hands gathered pieces to make this blanket. In the same way, many

⁵ Unpublished reflections by participant Eileen Klaassen Hamm, August 29, 2006.

hands prepared and gathered the pieces for this day.” On the hill, she reflected later, “we sewed all those pieces together.”⁶ In the gathering’s aftermath, Mennonites continue to be involved in raising funds for genealogical research to help establish the validity and scope of the Young Chippewayan claim.⁷

Paulette Regan describes an equally powerful feast in northern British Columbia. It was organized by the Gitxsan First Nation as an occasion for United Church of Canada leaders to make a public apology for abuses at a residential school operated under its authority and for school survivors to come home and be reinstated formally as members of the community. She writes: “The Hazelton feast hall in Gitxsan territory is a long way from the urban office towers where we can safely feel distanced from the victims of our benevolent peacemaking. Shifting from denial to recognition requires engaging history authentically. . . . The challenge for settlers is to listen attentively, reflectively, and with humility when we are invited into these spaces.”⁸

Regan’s account begins to name the attributes, the points of openness and awareness, that are demanded by a practical hermeneutic imperative of settler-aboriginal neighborliness. From the stories recollected above, I would add several others:

- acceptance of the obligations attached to proximity and place, of the gift of living where the need for reconciliation is a meaningful, everyday reality;
- willingness to respond positively to an invitation and to the experience of reciprocity without being the ones to offer it;
- openness to being unsettled, to the risks and uncertainties of a direct encounter;

⁶ Barb Froese, “Reflections on Stony Hill Celebration,” materials collected for the Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan meetings, November 4, 2006.

⁷ First Nations and settler communities gathered again on the treaty anniversary in August 2011 to renew their commitment to a just outcome for the band. Chief Ben Weenie told the gathering that “the struggle is not with the settlers but with [the Department of] Aboriginal Affairs in Ottawa who legislated us out of existence.” See Rod Andrews, “Laird community, Young Chippewayan band mark 135th anniversary of Treaty 6,” *Saskatchewan Valley News*, September 1, 2011, 1, 5.

⁸ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 211.

- respect for cultural protocols and sacred spaces, beginning with one's own;
- refusal to accept that the past is past, that the “modern” world is fixed on a certain path, and especially that aboriginal cultures are so absolutely, essentially, and unalterably incommensurate that there is no real hope of a decolonized understanding on the part of settlers;
- willingness to face up to our history, told differently, to confound the mythology that there was no one here when we came, to wonder who the “we” is, to tell entangled stories about families and regions and the entire country.

Inside this practical hermeneutic imperative, it matters what stories we choose to tell. What if, for example, we choose to understand Canada as having been founded, as James Tully suggests, “on an act of sharing that is almost unimaginable in its generosity”?⁹ What if along the Grand River you choose to make the two-row wampum a foundational text and Six Nations elders its primary interpreters, assuming that it can inform how you live entangled lives as neighbors in this watershed?¹⁰

One more prairie story deserves mention in relation to the hermeneutic imperative, though it is about a meeting of two people, not side-by-side communities. In the opening pages of the book *Stolen Life*, the reader is told how a Cree woman, Yvonne Johnson, an inmate at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario who was convicted of first-degree murder, will come to write her story with Rudy Wiebe, a Mennonite man, a settler, a writer, whose novel about her great-great-grandfather Big Bear she had read with reluctance. What could a stranger understand? Wiebe's novel, however, had “slapped her in the face.” She wanted to know: “How is it that you came to know as much as you do? What was the force behind you? Who are

⁹ James Tully, “The Negotiation of Reconciliation,” in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 1: *Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 244.

¹⁰ Once published, Coleman's essay, “Beyond the Book,” will be richly suggestive in regard to its call to read the two-row wampum.

you?”¹¹ She had taken the initiative to contact him. He chose to respond, not shirking the responsibility of the words he had sent into the world. She wrote feverishly. She trusted him with her audiotapes and her annotations on court transcripts. “Our past,” she wrote to him from prison, “has given each of us a gift of understanding.”¹²

I want to be careful not to say that Mennonites as such have any self-appointed special role when it comes to the work of understanding and reconciliation. The story of Stoney Knoll is not the norm; it took exceptional leadership and relationships built over time. Nor is the MCC Ontario presence at Caledonia or at Ipperwash, site of a long-standing land dispute and the 1995 police shooting of a Chippewa protest leader,¹³ widely appreciated in member churches. But there is work to do in most of the places in Canada where Mennonites have settled and now live. We have been given the gift of proximity, of being in the way; and we can choose to accept it. And we do possess resources that can serve as bridges to understanding.

Those of us who are attentive to our own stories of sorrow, displacement, and loss; those of us whose ancestors were once outsiders in this country, linguistically, culturally, and politically, and indeed were once attracted to it because it promised room for difference; those of us who are still rooted in real places with complex, layered, entangled histories; those of us who know the meaning of land, the way it shapes identities, the ethos of stewardship it requires; those of us who can treat understanding as a gift when it is hardest

¹¹ Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998), 8-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ The final report of the provincial inquiry into the police shooting conducted by Judge Sidney Linden can be found at www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/mandate/index.html. The report, released in 2007, found that the provincial leadership of the day viewed the occupation as a “law enforcement issue,” not as an action to be understood in the context of history and an ongoing land claim, and that in its “racist comments” and desire for a swift end it created a climate that led to the shooting. In his statement at the public release of the report, accessible at the same website, Judge Linden also noted the Caledonia conflict: “The single biggest source of frustration, distrust, and ill-feeling among aboriginal people in Ontario is our failure to deal in a just and expeditious way with breaches of treaty and other legal obligations to First Nations. If the Governments of Ontario and Canada want to avoid future confrontations they will have to deal with land and treaty claims effectively and fairly.”

to achieve; those of us who are capable of giving and receiving hospitality, beginning with food; those of us who live with humility and reverence – which is to say, a large number in total, with plenty of room for more conservative members too – we have work to do. Or better to say that the work will find us. The uncommon ground into which we are invited will surprise us. And we will be *encouraged* to let go, to imagine and participate in something new – without certainty of the outcome.¹⁴

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THE BECHTEL LECTURES

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman with an active interest in Mennonite history. His dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the academy and the church. The lecture series provides a forum through which the core meaning and values of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and heritage can be communicated to a diverse audience, and be kept relevant and connected to today's rapidly changing world. Held annually and open to the public, the Bechtel lectures provide an opportunity for representatives of various disciplines and professions to explore topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history, identity, faith, and culture. Lecturers have included Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, James Urry, Sandra Birdsell, Alfred Neufeld, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, and Ernst Hamm.

¹⁴ I have been helped to think about political courage and encouragement in new ways by Darin Barney. His related article, "Eat Your Vegetables: Courage and the Possibility of Politics," is found in the online journal *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (2011).

THE 2012 BENJAMIN EBY LECTURE*

Gandhi and Mennonites in India

James Pankratz

Introduction

This lecture is part of my ongoing research on Mennonite missionaries in India, especially their interpretation of Hinduism. Here I examine how Mennonites and Gandhi interpreted Hinduism and Christianity, and expressed their commitment to nonviolence.

Background Chronology

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi¹ was born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar, a coastal town on the Arabian Sea on the northwest coast of India in the present state of Gujarat, there were no Mennonites in that country. At the time of his birth, the first Mennonites who would come there as missionaries, Abraham Friesen and Maria Martens, were children, ten and nine years old, living in south Russia.² Nineteen years later, when Gandhi sailed from Bombay to England in September 1888 to study law in London, Friesen and Martens had married and were studying at the Baptist Missionary School at Hamburg-Horn in Germany, preparing for missionary service in India.³ Nearly three years later, on June 10, 1891, Gandhi was called to the bar in London. Two days after that he boarded the steamship “Oceana” for the return trip to his native land.⁴ By the time he arrived, the Friesens were

¹ There are many biographies and studies of M.K. Gandhi. The major sources for general information and interpretation of Gandhi's life for this article were Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008); Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); Judith M. Brown and Anthony Parel, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011).

² Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telegus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India 1885-1975* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 1997), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Rajmohan Gandhi, 46.

already settled in Nalgonda, about 65 miles east of the city of Hyderabad, in the present state of Andhra Pradesh. Although they were supported by the Mennonite Brethren in Russia, Abraham was pastor of a church of 300 members that had been established and sponsored by the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU).⁵

Thus, in 1891, for the first time Gandhi and Mennonites were both in India. But that circumstance was not to last long. Gandhi's first attempts at practicing law were unsuccessful, so he accepted an invitation to represent a law firm in South Africa. On April 19, 1893, after less than two years back in India, he boarded the "Safari" and sailed from Bombay to Durban. Although he intended to stay for only a year to complete the specific legal business he had been sent to transact, it would be more than 21 years before he returned to live in India again.⁶

When Gandhi arrived in Bombay on January 9, 1915, there were a dozen Mennonite churches, several schools, orphanages, clinics and hospitals, and 50 Mennonite missionaries in India. The Mennonite Brethren, who had begun their work in 1889, were clustered in the Hyderabad region. Mennonite Church missionaries, who had arrived in 1899, and General Conference Mennonite missionaries, who entered India in 1900, were in the Chhattisgarh region about 500 miles southwest of Calcutta, near the main railway line to Bombay.⁷

Mennonite missionaries came to India in response to two main impulses. First, they were deeply affected by the revivalism, pietism, and evangelism of Baptists and Lutherans that had stimulated the birth of the

⁵ Penner, 3.

⁶ The story of Gandhi's years in Africa is recounted and interpreted quite differently in Rajmohan Gandhi, 53-174, and Lelyveld, 3-133.

⁷ The fullest Mennonite Brethren accounts are by Penner, cited earlier, and Paul. D. Wiebe, *Heirs and Joint Heirs: Mission to Church Among the Mennonite Brethren of Andhra Pradesh* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2010). The story of the Mennonite Church in India has been told by John Allen Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972). Ruth Unrau has written *A Time to Bind and a Time to Loose: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church Mission Involvement in India from 1900-1995* (Newton, KS: Commission on Overseas Mission, General Conference Mennonite Church, 1996). These missionaries and their sponsoring agencies also published 25-year and 50-year anniversary volumes in addition to regular annual reports. Many missionaries published personal memoirs after their service in India.

Mennonite Brethren (“MB”) movement in Russia and strongly influenced many Mennonites in the United States. In both the US and Russia, numerous Mennonites became convinced that they had a spiritual responsibility beyond the preservation of their own community. Using the language and worldview of the day, they increasingly expressed concern that they were not doing enough to ensure that the “heathen” heard the message of salvation and came to faith in Christ.⁸ In the late 19th century all the major Mennonite groups in the US established mission and relief organizations, such as the Mennonite Evangelizing and Benevolent Board of the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Foreign Mission Board, and the Foreign Mission Committee of the Mennonite Brethren. Locally there were Home Mission projects initiated in Philadelphia and Chicago, and among native Americans in frontier regions. As well, some Mennonites served with or supported the mission agencies of other denominations.

Mennonites also raised funds for international relief efforts in response to the earthquakes, famines, and wars reported in the newspapers. It was this second impulse that brought Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonites to India. George Lambert, an entrepreneurial minister from Indiana, traveled around the world in 1894-95, frequently staying with Protestant missionaries. He maintained correspondence with some of them after returning to the US, and through them he became aware of the devastating famine in several regions of India in 1897. He and other Mennonite leaders in the Elkhart, Indiana region established the Home and Foreign Relief Committee, and sent letters to Mennonite congregations asking them for “an act of love for the rescuing of the poor, starving people in India.”⁹ In partnership with other relief funds they quickly raised more than \$200,000 in cash and grain to send to that country.

Lambert traveled to India in April 1897 and oversaw the distribution of food and money. While there he sent weekly reports to the Mennonite paper, the *Herald of Truth*. Later he published those reports in a book, *India, the Horror-Stricken Empire, Containing a Full Account of the Famine, Plague, and Earthquake of 1896-97. Including a Complete Narration of the Relief*

⁸ See Wilbert R. Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions 1850-1999* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), ch. 6.

⁹ Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962*, 29.

Work Through the Home and Foreign Relief Commission (Berne, 1898). This impetus more than any other brought Mennonites to the Chhattisgarh plain in India's Central Province, where the effects of the famine were still severe two years later.

Whether the original mission impetus was establishing churches or feeding the hungry, Mennonite mission work in different locations soon looked much the same.¹⁰ There was famine and disaster relief. Clinics and hospitals were established, including significant work among those with leprosy (Hansen's Disease). Children were taught literacy and trades in orphanages and schools. Missionaries and Indian Christians traveled from town to town preaching, handing out Christian literature, and offering medical care. Converts were baptized and churches were established. To use today's language, it was holistic mission. For these Mennonites, worship, ethics, economic life, and health were interdependent. They quipped that their mission was "Soup, soap, and salvation."¹¹ They were not being ironic.

The Mennonite churches in India were established among marginalized people, poor, low caste or outcaste, and tribal groups. It is difficult for us today to imagine the extent and severity of their marginalization. Their huts were outside the main part of the village. They could not drink water from the same wells, share food, travel with, or worship in the same temples as higher caste Hindus. Barbers would not cut their hair and washermen would not do their laundry. They were almost all illiterate. Their occupations were indicative of their status. In Chhattisgarh the prominent occupational group with whom Mennonites worked was the Chamar, a leatherworking caste involved with the polluting activities of handling dead animals. Lepers, another marginalized group in Chhattisgarh, for many years constituted a large portion of the church membership. In the Hyderabad region many Mennonites were of Mala or Madiga background.¹² The Malas were servants, coolies, basket weavers, and field laborers, while the Madigas were scavengers, leather workers, and coolies.

¹⁰ James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 30-32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² Paul D. Wiebe, *Christians in Andhra Pradesh: The Mennonites of Mahbubnagar* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1988), 54-55.

Most of the first Mennonite converts were low and outcaste employees of the missionaries, residents of the leprosy hospital, or orphans. This defined the character of the local church and Christianity. Even though missionaries always aspired to the ideal of a multi-caste church, the early identity of the church as a haven for the marginalized became a significant barrier to multi-caste membership.

There was another dimension to this marginalization. Many converts were rejected by their families and evicted from their communities when they joined the church. This rejection accentuated the cultural and social separation of Christians and their Hindu neighbors. On the one hand, it provided an opportunity for converts to identify with the educated and privileged missionaries and to gain access to educational and vocational opportunities they would not have had within their social setting. On the other, even if they became well educated, changed occupation, and became economically self-sufficient, they were still stigmatized by their former identity. Thus they were doubly marginalized – for their former identity as outcaste Hindus and for their new Christian identity as religious and social traitors.

This is the context for our look at Gandhi and Mennonites in India.

* * * * *

Direct interaction between Mennonites and Gandhi was very limited. Missionaries were sometimes in the crowds listening to him speak as he crisscrossed India,¹³ as their journals and collections of photographs attest. I. P. Asheervadam writes that Gandhi visited the Mennonites in Dhamtari on two occasions “during the height of the independence movement,”¹⁴

¹³ There is a delightful account of an encounter with Gandhi during one of his visits to a town in northern Bihar where Brethren in Christ missionaries were living. Amos Dick was asked by community leaders to provide goat milk for Gandhi and his entourage. He was eager to ask Gandhi some questions, because he had studied many of Gandhi's speeches. But Gandhi arrived on Monday, his weekly day of silence. So Dick sat in the crowded room, six feet from Gandhi, listening to the click, click, click of the spinning wheel. The next day, when Gandhi addressed the crowds, there was no opportunity for Dick to speak with him. Leoda Buckwalter, *Silhouette: Colonial India as We Lived It* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1988), 108-09.

¹⁴ John Allen Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, eds., *Churches Engage Asian Traditions* (Kitchener,

and that MCC worker William Yoder walked with Gandhi in East Bengal when the latter was trying to stop the violence in that region. John Lapp elaborates on one of those Dhamtari visits in late 1933, noting that Gandhi left a gift of Rs.1000 to support outcastes in the community.¹⁵ Weyburn W. Groff mentions a visit that Gandhi made to the Landaurl Language School in Mussoorie, soon after Indian independence, to reassure missionaries that there would be freedom of religion in India.¹⁶ The most extensive interaction between Mennonite missionaries and Gandhi appears to have been M.C. Lehman's visit to Gandhi in his ashram in Sabarmuti in 1929 and their conversation about faith and conversion.¹⁷

There is one record of correspondence between Gandhi and Mennonite missionary J.N. Kauffman. On June 30, 1947 Gandhi sent a postcard to Kauffman with this simple message: "Why worry? I am in the same boat with you." We will return to that enigmatic postcard message later.

I note these few documented encounters to stress that while I am not able to offer much about interactions between Gandhi and Mennonites, because direct interactions were very limited or almost entirely undocumented, I can describe how Gandhi and Mennonites addressed common issues and provide an account of what Mennonites said about Gandhi's work and ideas.

Mennonites and Hinduism

Mennonites and Gandhi agreed that religion was the foundation of life. Religion was the energizing dynamic of culture; it determined the destiny of a society. They agreed that worship, ethics, and community life were inseparably interconnected. Thus it was inexplicable to Mennonites in India that Gandhi would not reject Hinduism and embrace Christianity. Missionaries and Indian Christian converts alike regarded Hinduism as the

ON: Pandora Press, 2011), 170.

¹⁵ Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962*, 82-83. The source of this information was a letter from missionary J. N. Kauffman to V. E. Reiff, November 30, 1933, in which Kauffman explained that while he had been invited to be part of the local welcoming committee to greet Gandhi, he declined because of the political implications of such participation.

¹⁶ Weyburn W. Groff, *Satyagraha and Nonresistance: A Comparative Study of Gandhian and Mennonite Nonviolence* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2009), xvii.

¹⁷ *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (1936): 12.

root cause of the social and spiritual evils that they experienced.

The first Mennonite missionaries knew little about India or its religion when they arrived. Their personal journals, letters to family, reports to mission agencies, sermon and teaching notes, and articles in the Mennonite press describe their impressions and interpretations. After the first pioneer decades of missionary activity there was a substantial reservoir of collective experience, assumptions, and attitudes that shaped the interpretation of Hinduism and Indian culture in the emerging Indian Mennonite church, the North American Mennonite constituency, and the new missionaries who came to India.

Many missionaries were careful students of Indian religious life. Their notebooks contain descriptions of Hindu gods and goddesses, summaries of scriptures, and outlines of Hindu religious teachings that were based largely on their reading of contemporary European scholars such as Max Mueller, Albert Schweitzer, and A. A. MacDonell.¹⁸ They were also diligent ethnographers. They described the shrines and worship of local gods and goddesses and their influence on health, family life, and agriculture. In their letters, articles in the Mennonite Church press, and books they described trips to temples and festivals, preaching excursions, conversations with Indians who were curious about Christian faith, and tense encounters with those who adamantly opposed the missionaries and harassed the converts. More than a dozen missionaries wrote masters or doctoral theses in sociology, anthropology, history, and religious studies based on their experiences in India between 1900 and 1970.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962*, 78-79.

¹⁹ For example, M. C. Lehman (Mennonite Church missionary in India 1906-1930, d. 1963) earned a doctoral degree in philosophy from Yale in 1934 with a thesis on the writings of the 19th-century poet, dramatist, critic, and journalist Bharatendu Harishchandra. Aldine Brunk (Mennonite Church missionary in India 1912-1947, d. 1969) wrote a master's thesis on village evangelism for the College of Missions in Indianapolis in 1921. Henry Krahn (Mennonite Brethren missionary in India 1956-61, d. 1985) completed a master's thesis at the University of Washington in 1962 on the historical development of the MB mission program in India. John Wiebe (Mennonite Brethren missionary in India 1927-1959, d. 1963) wrote a master's thesis at the University of Minnesota in 1949 on the acculturation of the *Madiga*, a low/outcaste group in the state of Andhra Pradesh, who became Christians.

In addition, there are unpublished summaries and evaluations of the religions of India, such as George Jay Lapp's 165-page manuscript, "Historical Development of Hindu Society:

Missionaries not only observed and documented; they also explained, compared, and evaluated Indian religious life from their own religious perspectives and within the framework and cultural assumptions of Europeans and North Americans. For example, George Lapp wrote in 1921 that

[t]heir religion is based on ancient writings known as the Vedas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagvat Gita. The most ancient are philosophical. As the Aryan tribes came into contact with the more materialistic idolatrous aborigine, they took on their forms of worship till Hinduism had become a system of idolatry represented by the philosophical teachings of those who use images as symbols on the one hand to the worshippers of the images themselves on the other. One says, 'We worship the Deity with symbols, when we bow down to an idol; but we worship the power or virtue or characteristic for which that idol stands'.... But the poor ignorant heathen must have something before him which possesses some real power. So the priest has an idol made, puts it on an altar in a temple, blows in its ears and nose and mouth, puts a garland around its neck and tells the unsophisticated heathen, 'These be thy gods.' When he knows he is telling them a lie.²⁰

Their overall assessment of various popular expressions of Hinduism was strongly negative. Hinduism was darkness, Christian faith was light. Hindus were heathen, spiritually ignorant, misguided, and blinded by Satan. "Heathen" was a derogatory term indicating a religion and a culture of inferior quality and value, but also a descriptive term meaning a religion other than Christianity or Judaism.²¹ In German the Mennonites referred to all their

Strength and Weakness of Hinduism." George J. Lapp (and Fannie Hershey Lapp) Collection, Hist.Mss.1-143, Box 1, File 22, Mennonite Church USA Archives—Goshen, Goshen, IN. Lapp, who died in 1951, was a Mennonite Church missionary in India 1905-1945.

²⁰ George Jay Lapp, *Our Mission in India* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1921), 13.

²¹ The word "heathen" was also used to describe Gandhi, even when complimenting him. In 1929 MB missionary John Voth reported to delegates of the Canadian Conference meeting in Herbert, Saskatchewan that it took "Gandhi, a heathen" to teach the militant Christian nations "the non-resistance which our forefathers for 400 years had tried to bring to the attention of

foreign mission as *Heidenmission*. That language is jarring for many of us now, but it was the language of common public discourse at the time, and it reflected widely shared assumptions in North America and Europe until well after the Second World War. A scholar studying American impressions of India and China wrote in 1958 that “the image of the very benighted heathen Hindu is perhaps the strongest of all that came to us out of India from the past and it retains its full sharpness up to the present day. It appeared, vivid, clear, and particularized. . . .”²²

What was it that Mennonites found so offensive in Hinduism in the first half of the twentieth century?

First of all, polytheism. Given that one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish and Christian traditions is monotheism, missionaries were astonished and repulsed by the multitude of gods and goddesses. Some deities, like Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, and Kali had a kind of universal character, appearing in multiple manifestations throughout the subcontinent. Others were local, identified with specific natural features like trees or mountains, or with phenomena such as smallpox, weather, harvest, human sexual fertility, or childrearing. There were plenty of popular stories about the scheming exploits, conflicts, fits of temper, and sexual prowess of gods and goddesses.

Second, there was popular worship. Gandhi quoted the aphorism “As is the God, so is the votary.”²³ He meant it to express the aspiration that people could become like the gods they worshiped. For Mennonites, the phrase concisely identified the problem. The gods and popular forms of worship were all around them – temples, idols, sacrifices, processions, and festivals with pulsating chanting, drumming, and dancing. There were priests colored with ashes, ocher, and blood red paint. In temples and pilgrimage sites, surging crowds of worshipers frantically pushed for glimpses of the god or goddess. And everywhere there were religious devotees with long

the nations.” Cited in Penner, 143.

²² Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on our Minds: American Images of China and India* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1958), 259. See also Stephen Prothero, “Hinduphobia and Hinduphilia in U.S. Culture,” in *The Stranger’s Religion: Fascination and Fear*, Anna Lannstrom, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 13-37.

²³ Cited in M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 10. The quote is taken from Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Phoenix, Natal, South Africa: International Printing Press, 1910), ch. 16, n.p.

matted hair, bodies pierced and emaciated in self-mortification. Mennonites interpreted the powerfully sensuous Hindu worship as an expression of the character of the gods. And they were horrified.

Mennonites were people of the book, the Bible. In India they encountered not only a bewildering variety of Scriptures with varying levels of authority, but also mass illiteracy. Like other Protestants at that time, Mennonites were very anti-Catholic, and their critique of Hinduism on this issue was nearly identical to their criticisms of Catholics in other settings, namely that the priests were deliberately keeping the mass of people ignorant. Bible translation and literacy education were always among the first priorities of Protestant and Mennonite missions.²⁴ Missionaries also frequently referred to the superstitions and fears of local populations about matters such as weather, agriculture, illness, and propitious dates for travel or weddings. For most of these issues, missionaries had naturalistic explanations and responses. Like most Protestants, they de-spiritualized the material universe.²⁵ But the Christian practice was not consistent. While missionaries and Indian Christians emphasized the folly of praying to local deities for healing, they always prayed for healing in the name of Jesus, and thanked God for intervening on behalf of those who were healed.

Finally, Hinduism legitimated the caste system that was the most defining characteristic of Indian society. Caste divided people into very broad categories and specific occupational groups. It defined the permissible relationships and interactions among groups on matters like marriage, eating, access to temples, and physical contact. The domination of some caste groups by others was justified on the grounds that people's situation in this life was a reward or punishment for good or bad behavior in past lives. The most egregious manifestation of caste was the practice of untouchability that marginalized tens of millions to the fringes of communities, to demeaning work, and to massive exploitation. Missionaries, colonial administrators,

²⁴ See Prothero, "Hinduphobia and Hinduphilia in U.S. Culture," 27-31.

²⁵ As the anthropologist Paul Hiebert so cogently argued, this led to the "flaw of the excluded middle," the separation of the spiritual and the material that has characterized post-Enlightenment thought. This "middle" involves such matters as disease, accidents, childbirth, planting crops, setting dates of weddings, aligning a house, and setting off on a journey. See Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (January 1982): 35-47.

traders, travelers, and a significant number of Indians regarded Hinduism as then widely practiced as the primary cause of the degradation of so many in India.

Gandhi and Hinduism

What about Gandhi? He championed the cause of the untouchables, whom he called harijans (children of God), but who call themselves Dalits (those who are crushed). How did he interpret Hinduism? What were his own religious practices?

Gandhi was born a Hindu and followed the Vaishnava practices of his family without much reflection till he went to England to study law. There he met British people who introduced him to books and ideas that significantly shaped his lifelong religious worldview.²⁶ A vegetarian by practice, he now became one by conviction. He developed friendships with Theosophists (members of a philosophical-occult movement with high regard for the religions of India) who “disabused [him] of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition.”²⁷ Theosophist friends invited him to study the Bhagavad Gita with them, thinking he would be able to help them explore its riches in the original Sanskrit. He had never read the Gita before and knew very little Sanskrit, but he studied it with them in Edwin Arnold’s English translation, *The Song Celestial*, and it became the central Scripture of his life. He also read Arnold’s study of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*. Throughout the rest of his life he continued to deepen his understanding of Hinduism and to expand his knowledge and appreciation of other religions. His religious practices included meditation, prayer, singing, and scripture reading, using sources from Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim traditions.

Gandhi’s interpretation of Hinduism was selective. He identified core criteria by which he evaluated scriptures, theology, and religious practices, and on this basis he gave prominence to some texts and practices and marginalized others. For example, he focused on the elevated ideals and aspirations of Hinduism, while challenging many of its central practices like

²⁶ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 25-44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

untouchability and idol worship. Writing in his paper *Young India* in 1925, he characterized himself this way:

I am not a literalist. Therefore I try to understand the spirit of the various scriptures of the world. I apply the test of satya [truth] and ahimsa [nonviolence] laid down by these very scriptures for their interpretation. I reject what is inconsistent with this test, and I appropriate all that is consistent with it.²⁸

He applied these criteria even to his favorite scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, a small section of the Mahabharata, the massive epic poem recounting the conflict between two parts of the same family. The Gita is a subtle, extended argument to convince Arjuna, the commander of one of the armies, that it is his religious and social duty to lead his troops into battle against other members of his own family. Gandhi interpreted the Gita symbolically, arguing that it was a spiritual guide for the inner battle between good and evil within all humans, a battle that could only be won by assertive, selfless action. The Gita, he wrote, is “the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth.”²⁹

Gandhi did not defend those aspects of Hinduism that led to the social evils he was trying to remove. He wrote in his autobiography that while he was struggling with his religious identity in South Africa he was unable to accept that Hinduism was the greatest religion because

Hindu defects were pressingly visible to me. If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or an excrescence. I could not understand the *raison d'être* of a multitude of sects and castes.³⁰

But overall he counseled against offending or undermining the religious sensibilities of common people, who were still charmed and edified by temple rituals, pilgrimages, and devotional practices that he himself would not participate in. He argued, as countless Hindus have, that such practices reflected an immature stage of religious awareness but could become the

²⁸ Cited in Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s Religion and its Relation to his Politics,” *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 94.

²⁹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

building blocks for a much deeper religious understanding within the vast, rich expanse of Hinduism. Gandhi was convinced of the need to work within Hinduism as it was.³¹

Identifying with Hinduism was also a significant part of *swaraj* (self-rule). If India was to be independent politically, it must also be independent culturally and spiritually. If religious reform was needed, it would be defined and implemented by Hindus drawing from the profound resources of Hinduism.³²

Gandhi's selective approach to Hinduism was very much like longstanding Mennonite selective responses to Christianity. When critics condemned established Christianity for its history of violence and domination, Mennonites joined in that criticism and at times stated flatly that those who perpetuated such violence were not true Christians at all. Mennonites made the life of Jesus, his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and his self-sacrificial death the normative framework for interpreting the rest of the Bible and for assessing the faithfulness of the Church through history.

Mennonites and Christianity

Mennonite missionaries came to India convinced that all people should be converted to the Christian faith. New converts would leave the religious traditions and practices in which they had been raised and would, as much as possible, adopt the religious beliefs and practices of the missionaries. These

³¹ Gandhi's colleague Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India's first Prime Minister, had little patience for popular religion of any kind, including Gandhi's regular devotional practices. He once told journalist Frank Moraes that the only time he could see Moraes during busy Congress Working Committee meetings was "during Gandhiji's prayer meeting. I'm never there." Frank Moraes, "Gandhi Ten Years After," *Foreign Affairs* 36, no. 2 (Jan. 1958): 259.

³² Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a major Indian political and social reformer, disagreed with Gandhi on this issue. Ambedkar was a Dalit (outcaste) who served for several years as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. He strongly and very publicly advocated the emancipation and elevation of the outcastes, insisting that this could happen only outside Hinduism. In 1935 he declared that while he was born a Hindu he was determined not to die a Hindu. For many years Christian missionaries and Indian Christian leaders lobbied for him to become a Christian. But in October 1956, only weeks before his death, he converted to Theravada Buddhism, along with about 500,000 of his followers.

assumptions were based on their theology and experience.³³ There was one God, who was revealed through the Bible, the only authoritative scripture. There was one, common humanity, created to be in a close relationship with God. The sin of Adam and Eve affected all humans. All were now alienated from God, inclined toward sin, destined for death. All were guilty of sin. But God was gracious and loving, and took the initiative to restore the relationship with humans through Jesus, the only Son of God and the Savior of the world. Those who accepted the love and forgiveness of God offered through Jesus were saved from sin, released from guilt, and destined for eternal life. They joined together as the Church, a separate, voluntary community of God's people, disciples of Jesus, a light to the world, a model of what the kingdom of God would be.

Mennonite worship was based on words – the words of Scripture, hymns, prayers, sermons, and teaching. It was iconoclastic and had minimal ritual and pageantry. Its leaders were not priests who mediated between the members and God. Rather, they were preachers and teachers, called from within the membership to serve others, chosen primarily for their ability to use words to elicit and nurture faith.

The impulses that brought Mennonite missionaries to India were reflected in the characteristics of Christian life that they emphasized. Christians were to preach the Gospel to all people, to baptize those who

³³ Mennonite convictions about Christian faith, mission, evangelism, and those of other faiths were sometimes systematically articulated in books such as G.W. Peters, *Foundations of Mennonite Brethren Missions* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1984), and in denominational confessions of faith. But most often they were assumed and merely alluded to with symbolic Bible verses, such as those regarded as “Great Commission” texts – Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8. Missionary reports and periodic commemorative booklets nearly never articulated a cohesive theological framework, but usually assumed a commonly accepted theology and evoked it with specific biblical texts. Thus a booklet marking the 50th anniversary of MB mission in India contains nearly no biblical or theological reflection, but each of the three major sections opens with a Bible verse: John 20:21 – “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you;” Luke 24:47 – “Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all nations;” Rev. 3:8 – “Behold I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut.” Missionary sermons and Bible teaching provide more detailed elaboration of the basic beliefs summarized here. It is evident from archival records of those sermons and Bible lessons that missionaries preached essentially the same theology in India and in North America.

became believers, to establish churches, to serve those in need, and to live peaceful lives. Conversion and separation from the world were fundamental characteristics of the Christian life. A Christian was a new person belonging to a new people. This would be expressed visibly in clothing, speech, interpersonal relationships, occupations, simple living, and nonresistance. Such separation could result in persecution. Mennonite missionaries had long memories of the persecution, martyrdom, and exile that their ancestors had experienced. Since most of the persecution had been at the hands of other Christians, Mennonites were often critical of other Christians and kept separate from them as well.

Mennonite missionaries expected converts to have a new identity and the Mennonite Church in India to be separate from the religious and cultural world in which it was established. They expected a radical disjunction between the life of Indians before and after conversion, and frequently cited such changes in converts' lives as proof of the transformative power of the Gospel. While some Christian missionaries (such as Catholics and Unitarians) explored the commonalities and continuities between the beliefs and practices of Hindus and Christians, Mennonites did not. Christian faith would not be built with either the foundations or ornamentations of Hinduism.

Gandhi and Christianity

It was in England, as a young law student, that Gandhi first developed friendships with Christians. They offered him hospitality in their homes and invited him to church. He attended churches frequently, including the Metropolitan Tabernacle where the famous Charles Spurgeon preached. He was initially most attracted to Christian vegetarians, many of whom were also social reformers. One of those friends gave him a Bible. He read it, and later wrote in his autobiography that while the chapters following the book of Genesis "invariably sent me to sleep," the Sermon on the Mount "went straight to my heart."³⁴ "My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, the Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly."³⁵

³⁴ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

In South Africa and later in India Gandhi had many close Christian friends, most of whom prayed for his conversion, gave him books arguing for the truth of Christianity, and frequently urged him to become a Christian. A good number of them also wrote about his profound impact on their lives. During his time in South Africa, one of his British friends sent him Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Gandhi wrote that the "independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness" of this book "overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me."³⁶ It reinforced the conclusion he had reached when he first read the Bible years earlier: the Sermon on the Mount was at the center of the message of Jesus and should be at the center of Christianity.³⁷

Gandhi incorporated Bible reading and Christian hymns and prayers into both his own religious practices and the life of the communities (ashrams) that he established in South Africa and India. Two of his favorite hymns sung regularly in these communities were "Lead, Kindly Light" and "Take My Life and Let it Be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee." But there was much in the Bible and Christianity that he could not accept. He objected to the Christian teaching that humans are inherently sinful. He agreed that humans live in a society filled with sinfulness, and in that sense humans are "born in sin," but he did not agree that this was a necessary and defining characteristic of humanity. In a conversation with his Plymouth Brethren friend Michael Coates, Gandhi said, "I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself."³⁸ His friend warned him that this would be a fruitless quest, for sin was inherent in human nature. In a 1925 address to missionaries, Gandhi said, "One of the greatest of Christian divines, Bishop Heber, wrote the two lines which have always left a sting in me: 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile.' I wish he had not written them . . . [Man] is not vile. He is as much a seeker after truth as you and I are, possibly more so."³⁹

Because he did not accept the inherent sinfulness/evil of humans,

³⁶ Ibid., 114.

³⁷ Ibid., 112-15.

³⁸ Ibid., 103-04.

³⁹ Reported in *Young India*, August 6, 1925. Cited in Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 35. The lines are from the second stanza of the missionary hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Gandhi did not accept that the death of Jesus was atonement for the sins of others. Our sins were our own responsibility and could not be removed by the action of another, but only through our own disciplined life of virtue, self-restraint, service to others, and nonviolence. Although Gandhi did not interpret Jesus from a Christian perspective, he admired Jesus and often spoke and wrote about him.

I regard Jesus as a great teacher of humanity, but I do not regard him as the only begotten son of God.... Metaphorically we are all begotten sons of God.... Jesus came as near to perfection as possible. To say that he was perfect is to deny God's superiority to man....⁴⁰

He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had.... In Jesus' own life is the key to His nearness to God; that He expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the son of God.... And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name, or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.⁴¹

For all of his appreciation for Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, and the New Testament, or perhaps because of it, Gandhi had significant criticisms of Christianity. Many were the same criticisms expressed by Mennonites. Writing in the *Harijan* in 1936 he clearly reflected the anti-Constantinianism that has almost become a litmus test for Mennonite theologians; he said that orthodox Christianity had "distorted the message of Jesus" and that "when it had the backing of a Roman Emperor it became the imperialist faith as it remains to this day."⁴² Writing in *Young India* in 1920 he commented, "Europe is today only nominally Christian. It is really worshipping Mammon."⁴³

⁴⁰ *Harijan*, April 17, 1937, cited in Ellsberg, 26.

⁴¹ *The Modern Review*, October 1941, cited in Ellsberg, 27-28.

⁴² *Harijan*, January 7, 1939, cited in Ellsberg, 25-26.

⁴³ *Young India*, September 8, 1920, cited in Ellsberg, 32.

Gandhi was a persistent critic of Christian conversion. He wrote about it frequently and discussed it with Indian Christians and missionaries on countless occasions. He wrote that he supported conversion “in the sense of self-purification, self-realization . . . the crying need of the times. . . . [but] To those who would convert India, might it not be said: ‘Physician, heal thyself!’”⁴⁴

Gandhi supported the right of everyone “freely to profess, practice and propagate religion,” which is how such rights are now defined in the Indian Constitution. But he opposed conversion from one religion to another in principle and practice. The principle he expressed was that all religious traditions had within them the resources to stimulate spiritual inquiry, to experience God, and to provide the basis for a life of selflessness, nonviolence, and generosity. But all religions were limited. None could fully express the divine and none was the only path to spiritual fulfillment. None could be the arbiter of the others. When a person from one religious tradition experienced the riches of another, it was best to add rather than to replace. There should be not only mutual respect among religions but mutual enrichment. He often said that in the encounter between people of different faiths it should be the intention of a Christian, for example, to help the Hindu to be a better Hindu, and the Hindu should aspire to help the Christian be a better Christian. In this regard he thanked his Christian friends for the path of inter-religious discovery they had started him on, even though it had not led him to conversion as they had hoped.⁴⁵ Gandhi was, to use today’s language, a highly informed “religious pluralist.”

His second objection to conversion was that many Indian Christians had become Europeanized in dress, food, language, and social habits, and spoke abusively about Hinduism. In South Africa he learned that many young educated Indian Christians were not supporting the legal rights of other Indians because “they are under the thumb of the white clergymen, who in their turn are subject to the Government.” He wondered, “Was this the meaning of Christianity? Did they cease to be Indians because they had become Christians?”⁴⁶ In 1925 he wrote, “Is it not deplorable that many

⁴⁴ *Young India*, April 23, 1931, cited in Ellsberg, 45.

⁴⁵ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

Christian Indians discard their own mother tongue, bring up their children only to speak in English?”⁴⁷ While Mennonite and other missionaries usually took the change in lifestyle among converts to be a sign of transformation by the Spirit of God, Gandhi saw many of the changes as imitations of the “superficialities of European civilization.”⁴⁸ But he also noted gratefully, “I know that there is a marvelous change coming over Indian Christians. There is on the part of a large number of them a longing to revert to original simplicity, a longing to belong to the nation and to serve it, but the process is slow.”⁴⁹ We must remember that this debate about religious and cultural identity took place in the middle of a massive political agitation for *swaraj*, self-rule.

Gandhi’s third objection was based on his experience of Christians supporting and blessing war. M.C. Lehman recounted this conversation with Gandhi in his ashram in Sabarmuti in 1929:⁵⁰

Seated squat on the floor of his little mud office in his office at Sabarmuti I asked Gandhi in 1929 what was his attitude toward Christianity. Clad only in his loin cloth and large horn rimmed spectacles, Gandhi stretched out his bony finger and shook with sarcasm as his eyes flashed at me and he said. “Lehman Sahib, I would be ashamed to be a Christian.” Pressed for reasons Gandhi continued, “I went to the World War as a stretcher bearer. Many of my Hindu co-religionists were in the ranks. But we Hindus think and act more honestly as to war. We know war is wrong and cannot be religiously blessed and so we are honest enough to leave our priests at home. You are so inconsistent as to take chaplains along to bless wholesale murder. I helped carry the mutilated bodies of so-called Christian Germans and Englishmen who had stabbed and shot each other and blown each other to pieces. I saw you demolish each other’s churches and cathedrals.” And then his lips quivered as he continued, “I saw your so-called Christian soldiers charge across no-man’s

⁴⁷ *Young India*, August 20, 1925, cited in Ellsberg, 39.

⁴⁸ *Young India*, December 17, 1925, cited in Ellsberg, 40.

⁴⁹ *Young India*, August 20, 1925, cited in Ellsberg, 39.

⁵⁰ *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (1936): 12.

land with bayonets sharp and set to disembowel each other and they were led in their hellish work by a standard bearer who carried a standard on which was emblazoned the cross of the Prince of Peace. I would be ashamed to be a Christian.”

Nonviolence and Non-resistance

Mennonites and Gandhi agreed that a nonviolent/non-resistant life needed to be grounded spiritually. Mennonites said that non-resistance was not natural for humans, who were naturally inclined to sin and violence. Non-resistance was the result of a radical reorientation, a conversion brought about by an encounter with God through Jesus Christ. Non-resistance, as taught and modeled by Jesus, was possible only because of the indwelling Spirit of God that empowered people who had experienced the new birth.⁵¹

Gandhi grounded nonviolence on two premises. First, human nature is fundamentally good. Nonviolence can spark recognition, respect, and ultimately cooperation in the adversary. Satyagraha⁵² assumes that the opponent’s conscience will respond positively to nonviolent efforts to bring about justice. Second, the foundation of nonviolence is not a specific religion, but reliance on God.

[Gandhi] was too much of an ecumenist to imply that this was a Hindu struggle, or a Hindu and Muslim struggle, or a struggle against people who happened to be Christians. He called it a religious struggle because of the sacrifice his followers, his satyagrahis, were prepared to make. It was another way of insisting that their motives were pure and disinterested....⁵³

As Gandhi himself once put it, “To bear all sorts of tortures without a murmur of resentment is impossible for a human being without the strength that comes from God.”⁵⁴ The true satyagrahi is purified and strengthened through spiritual resources and ethical practices.

Mennonites and Gandhi both stated that non-resistance or

⁵¹ Groff, *Satyagraha and Nonresistance*, 155.

⁵² He used the term “passive resistance” till 1908.

⁵³ Lelyveld, 126-27.

⁵⁴ *Harijan*, June 3, 1936, cited in M. K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, 364.

nonviolence were not merely instrumental, not tactics to be abandoned if unsuccessful. They were not, as we say today, just some of many tools in the toolbox. However, Mennonites argued that Gandhi's approach really was instrumental, since he at times acknowledged there could be occasions when a violent response would be appropriate. He offered to support the British war effort in World War II in return for assurance that India would receive independence when the war was successfully concluded. Then in August 1942 he helped formulate the "Quit India" resolution which stated that a free India would "resist aggression with all of the armed as well as nonviolent forces at its command." For Mennonites, those positions were incompatible with non-resistance.

There were other differences. Mennonites in India and America often expressed discomfort and concern about the adversarial, confrontational non-cooperation campaigns that Gandhi led. These "agitations," as they sometimes called them, were provocative. Whether the violence that resulted was initiated by protestors or authorities, the non-cooperation campaign itself had to accept responsibility for inciting it. Many American pacifists shared this concern. Civil disobedience did not seem to them to reflect the goodwill and love that should be the motivating spirit behind social reconciliation.⁵⁵

Missionary M.C. Lehman, who had interviewed Gandhi several years earlier, expressed these concerns in a 1936 article in the Alumni Newsletter of the *Goshen College Bulletin*.⁵⁶ He wrote that Gandhi's work was "a process designed to exhaust." It was "retaliatory" and a "coercive force of mass collective representation and obstruction." Protests that resulted in a violent response by the police and army were "an artificial set-up."

When Guy Franklin Hershberger wrote his landmark *War, Peace and Nonresistance* in 1944, he took the same point of view. His main criticism of Gandhi's nonviolent resistance was that its purpose was to seek justice, redress for grievances, and political change.⁵⁷ That seems self-evident and hardly controversial today, less than two years after the demonstrations

⁵⁵ Leilah C. Danielson, "In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi': American Pacifists, Christianity and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915-1941," *Church History* 72 (2003): 361-88.

⁵⁶ *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (1936).

⁵⁷ Guy Franklin Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 190-91.

and political transformations of the “Arab Spring.”⁵⁸ But Hershberger and Mennonite missionaries in India demanded a disinterested non-resistance that was simply obedience to God and a strong symbol of separation from the world. As Lehman put it in the *Goshen College Bulletin*,

What then is the nature of the New Testament attitude toward evil and how to overcome it? This attitude is one of non-participation in and non-association with evil and of clear testimony against it by precept and example. “Come ye out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord.” II Cor. 6:17.⁵⁹

Gandhi, for his part, often argued that non-resistance or pacifism was largely the strategy of the weak who had few options and would gladly have used violence if they thought it could be successful.⁶⁰ Passive resistance was negative, but satyagraha was an active principle: “Love those that spitefully use you.” Satyagraha intended to move the heart and to lift up rather than to destroy the adversary.⁶¹

Gandhi’s position was close to Tolstoy’s, who wrote this dialogue in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*:

Q. Ought the word “non-resistance” to be taken in its widest sense – that is to say, as intending that we should not offer any resistance of any kind to evil?

A. No; it ought to be taken in the exact sense of our Savior’s

⁵⁸ The change in Mennonite understanding, activism, and language is exemplified by the Fall 2011 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, which focuses on the “Warsaw Lectures” presented by John Howard Yoder in 1983. The article by David Cortright, “Toward Realistic Pacifism: John Howard Yoder and the Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Peacemaking” (pages 54-72) examines the impact of the teachings of Jesus on Gandhi and the development of the nonviolent method. The use of the terms “nonviolent peacemaking” and “nonviolent action” indicates how far the current discussion has moved from the separatist pacifist emphasis in Hershberger. In the section “The Success of Nonviolent Action,” Cortright identifies some of the apparent successes of “organized nonviolence” and includes among these the 2011 “unarmed revolutions” in Egypt and Tunisia.

⁵⁹ *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (1936).

⁶⁰ *Young India*, March 23, 1921, cited in M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, 3.

⁶¹ Stuart Nelson, “Gandhian Concept of Non-Violence,” in *Non-Violence and Social Change*, J. S. Mathur, ed. (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1977), 108.

teaching – that is, not repaying evil for evil. We ought to oppose evil by every righteous means in our power, but not by evil.

Gandhi insisted that evil, oppression, injustice, or exploitation must be resisted, but by using means that exemplified the truth and virtue of the satyagrahi's cause. It was possible to demonstrate good will toward opponents, to cooperate on common causes, even while continuing to resist what was evil. If the goal of violence was to suppress or eliminate the opponent, the goal of nonviolence was to create an ally. But despite their good intentions, satyagrahis should expect to pay a price for non-cooperation and resistance; they should be ready for suffering and punishment when they resisted the law and those in power, and for disappointment when their cause or they themselves failed. In fact, an essential feature of satyagraha was to invite suffering on oneself and thereby to appeal to the opponent's conscience. This required rigorous preparation. Crowds involved in nonviolent action must behave like "disciplined soldiers."⁶² Nonviolence was the lifestyle of the brave and committed. As Gandhi put it, "I believe in war bereft of every trace of violence."⁶³

But what if there was a war, a war with violence? What would the situation of Mennonite Christians in India be? As Independence drew closer, this became an urgent question. And that is what set in motion the correspondence that led to the enigmatic postcard that Gandhi sent to James Norman Kaufman in June 1947.

Kaufman and P. J. Malagar (later Bishop Malagar) were commissioned by the Mennonite Church in India to write a letter to several Indian leaders in the weeks before Independence, requesting exemption from military service. On June 21, 1947 they wrote:

It is our understanding that the Constitution for independent India is now in the making. While there is opportunity, we wish to make petition on behalf of the Mennonite Church, asking

⁶² *Young India*, August 8, 1921.

⁶³ *Harijan*, May 14, 1938. As noted earlier, Gandhi insisted that this nonviolent, suffering-resistant discipline was rooted in reliance on God. Yoder similarly grounds it in a "religious community discipline," a "religious vision," and a "distinctive spirituality." See Cortright, "Toward Realistic Pacifism: John Howard Yoder and the Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Peacemaking," 67-68.

for a provision in the new Constitution guaranteeing to us, as well as to other religious groups holding views similar to our own, a degree of religious liberty. We as a Mennonite people are conscientiously opposed to militarism in general and to war in particular. This position is made clear herewith for your information and reference. We do not seek to evade the duties of responsible citizenship. On the contrary we hereby express our willingness at all times to render civilian public service of national importance in lieu of war service should the calamity of war again overtake our country.⁶⁴

The letter was acknowledged by staff in the offices of most of the leaders. But nine days later Gandhi replied by postcard in his own handwriting: "Your letter. Why worry! I am in the same boat with you. Yours sincerely, M.K. Gandhi."

What did Gandhi mean? What boat? I assume that he meant that if there was a war, and if Indian citizens were conscripted into military service, he and the Mennonites would be on the same side of the issue and share the same treatment. The Indian Constitution does not refer to or include a specific provision for conscientious objection, but there is explicit recognition of freedom of religion in Part III, "Fundamental Rights." Although India has fought three wars with Pakistan, two protracted border battles with China in the high Himalayas, and an ongoing insurrection in Kashmir, it has an all-volunteer army and has never seriously considered conscription. Religious identity and convictions are not factors. From that perspective, all Indians are in the same boat.

This postcard from Gandhi is a highly prized artifact. It is in Box 1, File 22 of the James Norman Kaufman collection of the Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Indiana. Actually it is not really there. Only a copy of it is in that file, with a note advising the reader that the original is in the care of the archivist. The archivist brought it to me, in its own folder, within a protective sleeve, and I was allowed to hold it and read it.

There are two other artifacts in the Goshen Archives, not directly from Gandhi but marking the end of his life by an assassin's bullets on January

⁶⁴ Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962*, 92-93.

30, 1948. One is in the records of Aldine Carpenter Brunk and Eva Harder Brunk, who left India just months before Gandhi's death, after more than thirty years of missionary service. It is a torn copy of the Goshen newspaper, *The News-Democrat*, dated January 30, 1948. The front page headline shouts "Mahatma Gandhi Assassinated." More than two pages are dedicated to Gandhi's death earlier that day in a garden in Delhi and to the story of his remarkable life.

The other is in the files of Joseph Daniel and Minnie Graber, missionaries in India from 1925 to 1942. It is a copy of a Memorial Service honoring Mahatma Gandhi held at The Community Church in New York City on February 1, 1948.⁶⁵ The service included readings from the Gita, poetry, a tribute to Gandhi, ecumenical prayers, and the hymn "Take My Life and Let it Be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee." The final prayer ended with the Biblical words, "And so may the peace of God which passeth all understanding, that peace which the world can neither give nor yet take away, rest upon your minds and hearts this day and evermore. Amen."

Soon after Gandhi's death the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities sent a letter of condolence to the Indian Embassy in Washington and also issued this statement:

No one interested in India could help but be profoundly saddened by Gandhi's tragic death on January 30. Although not a Christian, he held Christ and His teachings in great respect. He was always a restraining influence on violence in that country. Let us pray that even after his death Christ's people in India may lead a quiet and peaceable life so that the purposes of God may be realized who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁶⁶

On February 10, 1948 J.D. Graber began his "Today in Mission" column in the *Gospel Herald* with the words "Gandhi is dead." He wrote:

Gandhi was not a Christian, but he lived out a spirit of sincerity and devotion to a cause that puts most Christians to shame.

⁶⁵ J. D. and Minnie Graber Collection, Hist.Mss.1-503, Box 1, File 11, Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen, Goshen, IN.

⁶⁶ *Gospel Herald* 41, no. 6 (February 10, 1948): 133.

And the principles by which he lived are in large part Christian principles that most of us are not courageous enough to live out.

Those principles, Graber continued, were based on Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, a part of the Bible that Gandhi cherished. He encouraged his readers to reaffirm their own commitment to peace as taught in that Sermon.

Gandhi, the Hindu, helping Mennonites to be better Christians. He would have been pleased.

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THE BENJAMIN EBY LECTURESHIP

Established at Conrad Grebel University College in the 1980s, the Benjamin Eby Lectureship offers faculty members an opportunity to share research and reflections with the broader College and University community. Benjamin Eby (1785-1853) was a leading shaper of Mennonite culture in Upper Canada from the 1830s on. He provided outstanding leadership in the church and in education throughout his life, all while supporting himself as a farmer. The Lectureship honors Eby's belief that the motivation to learn is a response to the Christian gospel.

ARTICLE

The Kinship of Creation: An Anabaptist Ecological Anthropology

Nathanael L. Inglis

Introduction

There is a growing consensus today that the earth is facing an ecological crisis, and that human action is one of the primary causes.¹ However, there is more to this crisis than just the practical concerns of overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species. What humanity faces is a more fundamental crisis of self-understanding. In this essay I will critically compare and evaluate assumptions about the human-world relationship inherent in two contemporary theological anthropologies that rely on very different metaphors. Both anthropologies attempt to correct the dominion-based ‘imperialistic anthropology’ that continues to enable the ecological crisis.

In “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” Walter Klaassen identifies two largely unquestioned assumptions in Western industrial culture that order people’s relationship to the world and to one another, which he sees as obstacles to solving the crisis. The first is the “passionate belief in the absolute right to private possessions,” and the second is “the conviction of the unimpeded right to pursue wealth.”² These two beliefs are made possible by and reinforced with “a trick of the mind devised by Western philosophy in which human beings are set over against

¹ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, et al., “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614-21. Steffen, Crutzen, and other environmental scientists identify human activity as such a significant factor in the transformation of ecosystems and climate today that they suggest our current geologic age should be called the ‘anthropocene.’

² Walter Klaassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), 141.

the world in which they live, making them the detached, subjective observers of objective nature and then taking a further step away in denying human kinship with the rest of creation.”³ The paradigm that Klaassen describes has become, in practice if not always in theory, the Western world’s dominant anthropology.⁴

This dominion-based view of humanity is what I call an ‘imperialistic anthropology’ because it envisions human beings as the unaccountable rulers or monarchs over the rest of the natural world. It regards humanity in anthropocentric terms, maintaining a hierarchical dualism between human beings and the rest of creation. Anthropocentrism privileges human life, qualities, and experiences over other forms of life. It is a type of hierarchical dualism, which Elizabeth Johnson defines as “a pattern of thought and action that (1) divides reality into two separate and opposing spheres, and (2) assigns a higher value to one of them.”⁵ Imperialistic anthropology begins with human interests, defining and valuing other creatures to the degree that they are useful. Non-human creatures are treated either as property or as natural resources, while humans are rewarded for pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of others.

The ecologically destructive patterns of thought and action characterizing an imperialistic anthropology have far-reaching implications, particularly from a theological viewpoint. Klaassen proposes that the destruction of ‘nature’ is intrinsically bound to a degraded understanding of ‘human nature.’ As he somewhat provocatively explains it, “God comes to us here in [North] America with his truth to lay bare the terrible travesty we have made of human nature. . . . Human beings have been degraded from being created in the image of God, with all the richness and potential that implies, into consumers.”⁶ Klaassen affirms that the ecological crisis is in part a problem of human self-understanding. How we relate to the natural world depends greatly upon what we believe our nature and destiny to be—on our theological anthropology.

³ Ibid.

⁴ By ‘anthropology’ I mean the way individuals, cultures, or religions understand who they are as human beings, why they are here, and how they relate to the rest of the natural world.

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 10.

⁶ Klaassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” 152.

Likewise, Carl Keener, a biologist and process theologian working in the Mennonite tradition, agrees that our problem with respect to nature is one of self-understanding. He suggests that what may be needed is

a new root metaphor enabling us to focus our energies toward a more humane village ... a paradigmatic shift leading to a different outlook concerning the cosmos. All of us think and act and make moral decisions from within the context of some worldview, some overarching perspective, and it's my hope we can reflect thoughtfully on what such a perspective might be if *Homo sapiens* is to survive the 21st century.⁷

Like paradigm shifts in scientific inquiry, which occur when aging theories that can no longer make sense of emerging data are replaced by new ones, Keener suggests that the metaphors that Christians have used in the past to make sense of human life on earth may no longer be best suited to make sense of human experience today. In light of the ecological crisis, it is important for theologians and Christian communities at least to critically evaluate the inherent assumptions about the human relationship to the rest of the world in the anthropological metaphors they adopt.

Similar to Klaassen and Keener, historian Lynn White makes the connection between how we understand ourselves and how we treat our environment:⁸

What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.... More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.⁹

⁷ Carl S. Keener, "Aspects of a Postmodern Paradigm for an Ecological Age," in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1996), 116.

⁸ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07. Some ecofeminist theologians have also notably made the connection between anthropology and ecology, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

⁹ White, "Historical Roots," 1205-06.

Identifying religion as a primary cultural influence on human self-understanding, White doubts that technology alone can save us from ecological disaster as long as a key driving force behind the crisis remains unchanged. For instance, if basic assumptions about the human place and purpose in the world are not transformed, no number of electric cars or composting toilets will help, since we cannot buy our way out of an overconsumption problem. Instead, by identifying in theological anthropology a link between how people see themselves and how they treat the environment, White argues that the crisis will not be averted until people begin to reevaluate how they understand human nature and destiny.

In related ways, Klaassen, Keener, and White each recognize that our ideas have functional value. The anthropological metaphors we adopt make a difference in how we live in the world, treat other creatures, and respond to the environmental crisis.

Theological Anthropologies and Metaphors

The first alternative to imperialistic anthropology I will consider is 'stewardship anthropology,' which imagines human beings as managers of property. As stewards over the earth, we humans have been given the special duty to care for and protect God's creation; we are not to use it or abuse it indiscriminately. The appeal of stewardship anthropology to some Christians is that it appears to be consistent with an understanding of God's will drawn from the Genesis creation accounts. However, by envisioning humans as property managers, stewardship focuses on human difference as a starting point for reflecting on our responsibilities toward other life. Stewardship is a metaphor that makes only superficial changes to the imperialistic human-world paradigm.

The second alternative relies on the metaphor of 'kinship,' which imagines all of life on earth as one extended genetic family. Taking inspiration from modern scientific insights about humanity's deep interconnection with the natural world, 'kinship anthropology' focuses on the many things we share in common with the rest of creation, rather than the few characteristics that make us distinct. Kinship is a metaphor that offers the prospect of expanding the Christian imagination to see the entire world as a community

of relations.¹⁰

Anabaptist communities have had differing degrees of environmental consciousness and ways of interacting with the land they live on. Of course, as Heather Ann Ackley Bean notes, “historically, environmental issues as we understand them today were not an Anabaptist priority (which is also true for most other Christian traditions).”¹¹ As people of their time and place, Anabaptists have often reflected broader social norms in their environmental values. Thus, their understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time. Today, many Anabaptist communities, along with other Christians, appeal to stewardship anthropology as the right framework for promoting ecological responsibility. I suggest, however, that kinship anthropology is a better alternative for an Anabaptist ecological anthropology today.

For many Anabaptists, life finds its fullest expression in loving community, and thus their anthropology has often valued human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. Kinship is a metaphor that, unlike stewardship, shares with Anabaptist anthropology these common assumptions about human relatedness to, and interdependence with, others. I will seek to show how the kinship metaphor not only is more consistent with the current scientific worldview but is also a natural extension of the Anabaptist emphasis on the fundamentally relational character of human nature.¹²

¹⁰ For the categories of stewardship and kinship I am indebted to Elizabeth A. Johnson’s argument in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*.

¹¹ Heather Ann Ackley Bean, “Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic,” in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 183.

¹² Although this essay relies primarily on contemporary Mennonite scholars as sources, I use the more inclusive terms ‘Anabaptist’ and ‘Anabaptism’ when referring to the theological concepts and traditions that I draw from them. I recognize that the terms ‘Anabaptist’ and ‘Mennonite’ do not always equate, and that each term refers not to a single tradition but to an overlapping constellation of ‘traditions’ that have a rich diversity of belief and practice, from their 16th-century beginnings onward. However, I still find the usage of ‘Anabaptist’ to be appropriate, because the values and beliefs about humanity which I discuss are largely shared across present-day groups who identify as ‘Anabaptist’ (this includes, for example, Anabaptist-Mennonites but also the Anabaptist-Pietist descendants of the Schwarzenau Brethren, such as ‘The Church of the Brethren’), and is thus relevant to the wider Anabaptist theological conversation.

Beyond a Romanticized Vision of Anabaptist Stewardship

The cultivation and farming of land is an occupation practiced by most Anabaptists to some degree until relatively recently.¹³ Like every other area of life in many traditional Anabaptist communities, “no distinctions were made between secular and sacred work, [and] the plowing of the fields or assembling for worship” were each given spiritual meaning.¹⁴ Especially now that fewer North Americans have any first-hand experience of farming, there is a tendency to romanticize traditional farmers as being ‘closer to the land’ and therefore more concerned about environmental preservation.

However, in his essay entitled “The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography,” Royden Loewen challenges the idea that closeness to the land or communitarian values naturally go hand-in-hand with environmental concern. He draws upon a wide spectrum of the Mennonite tradition, specifically literature, poetry, and the local histories of farmers. His study shows that the environmental track record of Mennonite farming communities has been ambiguous, often reflecting norms and values of their time and place.¹⁵ Local Mennonite histories, for instance, often contained contradictory accounts of “an affection for the environment and also a determination to ‘subdue’ it,” both of which they understood to be consistent with their faith.¹⁶

In his comparative study of mid-20th century Mennonite farming communities in Kansas and British Honduras (now Belize), Loewen observes that while the Kansans were more individualistic – holding private property and increasing landholdings – they were deeply concerned with the health of the soil. Mennonites in British Honduras, by contrast, eschewed private property and put restrictions on social mobility, yet had little regard for the

¹³ For instance, on changes in North American Mennonite demographics see Leo Driedger, “Alert Opening and Closing: Mennonite Rural-Urban Changes,” *Rural Sociology* 60, no. 2 (1995): 323-32.

¹⁴ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 120.

¹⁵ Royden Loewen, “The Quiet of the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 160-61; see also Ackley Bean, “Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic,” 186-90, where she describes several ways that the behavior of North American Anabaptists toward the environment have been inconsistent.

¹⁶ Loewen, “Quiet of the Land,” 157.

ecosystem that they clear-cut and bulldozed to create additional farmland.¹⁷ Even in the Kansans' case, however, the interest in soil conservation was far from selfless.

In Kansas land was commodified and only available to a declining breed of successful farmers, some well-to-do from oil and gas discoveries and others from irrigated land. In British Honduras land was seen as a divine gift for the procurement of communitarian humility. Both places sought to profit from the cultivation of land, but because the profits were envisioned for different purposes – varying combinations of individual status and communitarian solidarity – the environment was also eventually considered in diverse ways.¹⁸

Loewen's point is that while these two communities related to their environments differently, they both prized their land mainly in terms of its profitability. The land was valued and protected not for its own sake but to the degree that it was useful to them. They did not seem to imagine the natural world as having an intrinsic value of its own.

The slash-and-burn agricultural practices of Mennonite farmers in Belize may especially strike people today as indicating a lack of concern for the environment. However, in a context in which humans had relatively little power over the natural world, they interpreted their subdual of nature as an act of faith. Loewen explains:

Each of these communities pressed the land to yield a bounty and linked agriculture with the creation of order in nature, with the drawing of straight lines on the land. Huge effort was expended on semi-arid plain, intemperate prairie, or cleared jungle in the building of roads, fences and garden rows along cardinal points, thus giving testimony to Yi-Fu Tuan's observation elsewhere that social "harmony was ... believed to be a fruit ... of 'order on the land.'" ¹⁹

In both of these contexts, Mennonite farmers saw their systematic subdual of wilderness into orderly and usable farmland as an authentic form

¹⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of Christian stewardship.

Like Loewen, Walter Klaassen contends there is no intrinsic connection between the agricultural history of Anabaptists and what today we might consider to be an ecological consciousness. He notes that early Anabaptists became farmers not out of concern for the land, or even out of choice; instead, as a persecuted group, they farmed out of economic necessity. In fact, Anabaptism began as a largely urban movement. “It was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites became famous.”²⁰ The need to survive continues to drive Anabaptist farming practices in large part today. Describing the current state of farming, Michael L. Yoder observes that for modern North American farmers, including Mennonites,

[t]he pressure is to ‘get big or get out.’ Farmers can no longer treat farming simply as a way of life.... Farming has become a business, often a cutthroat business as farmers compete against each other to buy or rent more land, raising prices for both to uneconomic levels.... [In order to stay competitive,] farmers, Mennonite as well as non-Mennonite, have gradually become dependent on the technology of the modern world.²¹

Loewen, Klaassen, and Yoder demonstrate that the Anabaptist understanding of how humans should relate to the earth has evolved over time, and has varied according to the context and needs of particular communities. In each case, however, the survival of the community or the profitability of the land (two outcomes that are often related), took precedence over any additional concern or affection for the well-being of the environment for its own sake.

Loewen shows that while Anabaptist communities have displayed a certain degree of consciousness about responsibility toward the land, with some having “affection for the environment” or concern for the health of the soil, this sense of being ‘good stewards’ has not been consistently defined. At times, it has even resulted in behavior – such as the methodical destruction

²⁰ Klaassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” 142.

²¹ Michael L. Yoder, “Mennonites, Economics, and the Care of Creation,” in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 74-75.

of ecosystems to bring them under human control as arable farmland – that appears more consistent with imperialist anthropology. Loewen's study does not seek to portray these particular groups as 'bad environmentalists,' but it does demonstrate the deep-seated ambiguity at the heart of stewardship anthropology itself, which points to one of its major limitations for addressing the ecological crisis today. Stewardship anthropology, like imperialist anthropology, is still inherently anthropocentric. If this anthropocentrism remains unrecognized, Anabaptists today who identify as stewards of the environment will have difficulty altering the power dynamic that continues to tacitly justify ecological irresponsibility.

Promise and Limitations of Stewardship Anthropology

Stewardship is a biblical motif that has broader application than just our relationship to the environment. Christians have perennially drawn upon notions of stewardship to encourage one another to live generously in the world, using their talents, resources, and social privileges in service to others rather than for personal ambition. In his study of biblical stewardship, Milo Kauffman suggests that stewardship consists of

a special relationship between man and his God. God richly bestows upon man personality, abilities, and possessions and holds him responsible for their use. He is to use them to promote God's interests in the world.... A steward is entrusted with the possessions of another and manages them according to the will of the owner.²²

While the term 'stewardship' is not commonly used in the Bible, the sentiment – what you have is not your own, it has been entrusted to you for the good of all – runs throughout, from the Garden of Eden to the parables of Jesus.²³

In light of today's emerging ecological crisis, many concerned Christians, including Anabaptists, who are seeking greater theological justification to care for the earth are turning to stewardship anthropology. Christian portrayals of environmental stewardship differ, but they are

²² Milo Kauffman, *Stewards of God* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975), 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

typically a variation on themes drawn from the Genesis creation accounts, in particular from Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (NRSV)

Working with concepts like the image of God, human dominion, and subdual of the earth, stewardship anthropology is often explained along these lines: Human beings were created uniquely in God's image and put in charge of this world. Although God gave humankind dominion over the world and commanded us to subdue it, we are not to live like gods or kings on Earth, doing with it whatever we want. Instead, God calls humanity to a loving and wise dominion, deputizing us to govern the world not according to our own will but in conformity to God's own heart. God created the world, saw that it was good, and intends for us as stewards to keep it that way, tending the garden and allocating the resources of the Earth for the benefit of all. Misusing the Earth's resources is a sin, since it goes against God's intention for the world.²⁴

The influence of stewardship anthropology is evident in the 1994 Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) statement on the environment, "Stewards in God's Creation":

We believe that human beings have been created good and have been called to glorify God, to live in peace with each other, and

²⁴ Cf. Ibid., 96-98, 109-10; and Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, ed. Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 216-17 on two characteristic examples of 'stewardship anthropology' from a Mennonite and a Catholic perspective.

to *watch over the rest of creation*. We gratefully acknowledge that God has created human beings in the divine image and has given the entire human family a *special dignity among all the works of creation*.²⁵

Recognizing the extent to which human action is causing harm to the planet, the MCC draws upon stewardship anthropology to emphasize human *protection* of the natural world rather *dominion* over it. As Klaassen notes, Mennonites are beginning to recognize that ‘the peaceful reign of God’ is not limited to human relations but extends to the whole of creation.²⁶ By connecting our responsibility to ‘watch over’ the earth with our ‘special dignity,’ the MCC statement focuses on what makes us distinct from other creatures as the basis for understanding our relationship to the natural world. It is because of our ‘special dignity’ that we have been given a special purpose. This line of reasoning, with its focus on human uniqueness, is typical of stewardship anthropology.

Although the language of stewardship has had some success in motivating churches and individuals to take greater responsibility for how they live, it has significant shortcomings.

The goal of most Christians who promote stewardship is to encourage people to protect rather than exploit the earth, but stewardship anthropology is unable to fully realize this vision because it views the world anthropocentrically, maintaining a strict hierarchical dualism that imagines humans to be distinct from, and superior to, the rest of the created order.

As Milo Kauffman defines stewardship, a human steward is someone who manages another person’s property. As a metaphor for our relationship to the natural world, our fellow creatures are ‘owned’ by God and our job is to ‘manage’ them. If we are the ones responsible for managing creation, then stewardship anthropology, no less than dominion-based imperialistic anthropology, is premised on a hierarchical dualism despite its best intentions. The rest of creation is thought of as property, which has instrumental value, and humans are thought of as persons, who have intrinsic value. It is also hierarchical because it claims that humans have been invested by God

²⁵ Mennonite Central Committee, “Stewards in God’s Creation,” in Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*, 218. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Klaassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” 143.

with power over the rest of creation. Although it has softer edges than the imperialist model that it tries to correct, it still focuses on human differences from other creatures rather than similarities as the motivating factor for concern for the world.²⁷

Stewardship anthropology sometimes sees humans as servants of God and sometimes as servants of creation, but in either case it hides the fact that our relationships to other creatures are defined in terms of our privileged status. A similar tension arises in discussions of church leadership. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains:

Insofar as ecclesial relationships are structured and conceptualized in such a way that the church, clergy, religious, and men still remain the defining subjects, a servant ecclesiology deceptively claims service and servanthood precisely for those who have patriarchal-hierarchical status and exercise spiritual power and control.... As long as actual power relationships and status privileges are not changed, a theological panegyric of service must remain a mere moralistic sentiment and a dangerous rhetorical appeal that mystifies structures of domination.²⁸

The same logic holds true in our relationship to the world. As long as it is structured and conceptualized so that humans remain the defining subjects, stewardship deceptively claims servanthood for those who already have hierarchical status, power, and control. We can call ourselves stewards or servants, but the fact remains: if we consider humanity to be separate from and superior to the rest of creation, the power dynamic contributing to the ecological crisis will continue to operate, since it is far too easy to equate human self-interest with divine intent.

²⁷ Ibid., 30; Ackley Bean, in "Toward an Anabaptist/Mennonite Environmental Ethic," 185, argues that the lack of focus on the non-human world in the Anabaptist theology has not been an accident. Instead, it is the inevitable consequence of a tradition of anthropological reflection that focused on the human domination of nature in Genesis 1, rather than the Genesis 2 account that imagines humans as the servants of creation.

²⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 301. On power relations in the Mennonite church, see Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce, "Mennonite Ecclesiology: A Feminist Perspective," in *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 155-73.

In addition to maintaining that power dynamic, stewardship anthropology prevents us from seeing reality as it is. It overlooks the important fact that it is not simply human beings who steward the earth. More accurately, the earth stewards us. Trees are an obvious example. Elizabeth Johnson notes that, biologically, trees do not need humans to steward them – they thrived for millions of years before humans even came on the scene. Rather, humans are biologically dependent on trees: without them we could not breathe. So, she asks, “who then needs whom more? By what standard do human beings say that they are more important than trees?”²⁹ Fixating on humanity’s unique and privileged status, stewardship anthropology cannot adequately appreciate the reality that humans are a part of creation and all of creation is deeply interdependent.

The stewardship metaphor fails to visualize our profound dependence on other life forms and thus cannot fully articulate our relational responsibilities toward them. While the isolated Belize community described by Loewen interpreted the world through the lens of Christian stewardship, it also struggled to survive in the jungle during the mid-20th century. Given the community’s cultural context and influences, this was perhaps their only viable option. However, the reality of the collective impact of human actions on the environment today paints a very different picture. Humans are just one species sharing a fragile planet that, through our own willful exploitation or uninformed good intentions, we have consistently mismanaged. This reality not only poses an ethical challenge to consider the global consequences of our way of life but calls for a new theological interpretation of humanity’s place and purpose within God’s creation.

Kinship as an Ecological Anthropology

A theological anthropology based on the kinship metaphor begins not by reflecting on what makes humans different from other creatures but by emphasizing the many more ways we are related to, and an integral part of, the earthly biosphere. By adopting insights from the physical sciences about the nature of the universe, the earth, and our place within them, theologians Gordon Kaufman and Elizabeth Johnson suggest that interdependence rather than separation is a better starting point for understanding humanity’s place

²⁹ Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 31.

in the world. They both propose versions of kinship anthropology as a root metaphor for interpreting the human-world relationship.

Kaufman argues that a viable theological anthropology cannot be at odds with the best science of the day.³⁰ As he says in his major work, *In Face of Mystery*: “We will come much closer to articulating the fundamental assumptions about the nature of the human which are widely accepted today if we speak of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all other forms of life . . . and of our cultural creativity in history, producing a thoroughly cultural form of existence.”³¹ Thus, he proposes a “biohistorical” understanding of human beings as creatures who relate to one another and experience the world within interrelated biological and historical spheres.

That humans are biological should come as no surprise. Yet Kaufman points out that much of the theological and cultural history of the West holds a dissenting opinion, focusing on human distinctiveness from the biological world rather than rootedness in it. This idea is symbolized in the dualistic concept of a soul that is separable and essentially superior to the physical body. Kaufman insists that if Christian theology is to make sense of the human place in the world as it is understood today, the idea of a discontinuity between the psyche and the body or humans and the world is no longer intelligible.³² As he summarizes: “This intrinsic interconnection of world and human is one of the most fundamental conceptual presuppositions of

³⁰ While some Mennonite theologians do not view Gordon Kaufman’s work as “Mennonite” theology, others do. For instance, see A. James Reimer, “The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 33-55. Reimer, while skeptical of Kaufman’s theological method, recognizes that Kaufman’s work stands in continuity with the prophetic and ethical dimensions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. See also Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), in which a variety of Mennonite theologians engage Kaufman’s work as Mennonite theology. Regardless of one’s views on Kaufman as a specifically Mennonite or Anabaptist theologian, my primary reason for engaging his work in this section, along with the work of Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson, is because of their thoughtful contributions to the dialogue between theology and science.

³¹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 109.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

our modern experience and knowledge.”³³

As significant and fundamental as biological life is for conceiving our place in the world, according to Kaufman human biology can never be understood apart from cultural life, nor history apart from genetics. As a species, he argues, we were bio-historical from our very beginnings; human beings could not have existed without a shared symbol system.

In certain respects, the growth of culture—including an increasingly flexible and complex language, new forms of social organization ... increasing use of tools, and so on—itself shaped the biological development of the predecessors of *Homo sapiens* over some millions of years.... So the biological organism that finally developed as human was ‘both a cultural and a biological product.’³⁴

Kaufman’s biohistorical anthropology offers a viable alternative to the anthropocentric hierarchical dualism at the heart of both imperialistic and stewardship anthropologies. Instead of existing as if human life on earth is just a temporary stopover, Kaufman argues that human nature is itself the result of a deep evolutionary process of bio-historical development. Human history and biology cannot be separated, since they have each been indelibly shaped by the influence of the other.³⁵

Elizabeth Johnson, in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, also makes the case that kinship anthropology better matches the scientific-evolutionary world-picture than a stewardship approach. Discoveries in astrophysics, evolutionary biology, and quantum physics all point to a fundamental truth: “mutual interrelatedness is inscribed at the heart of all reality.”³⁶ For example, we are genetic relatives to all other life on earth: “the genetic structure of cells in our bodies is remarkably similar to the cells in other creatures, bacteria, grasses, fish, horses, the great gray whales. We have all evolved from common ancestors and are kin in this shared, unbroken genetic history.”³⁷ We are literally one extended family; our history as a species is part of the larger

³³ Ibid., 115.

³⁴ Ibid., 116.

³⁵ Ibid., 117.

³⁶ Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 32.

³⁷ Ibid., 35.

history of the planet along with the rest of the life on it.

We are not only related to the earth. We are also a dynamic part of the wider universe as a whole, since all the heavy elements comprising our bodies are products of the explosion of distant stars billions of years ago. “A crucial insight emerges from [the scientific] story of cosmic and biological evolution,” says Johnson. “The kinship model of humankind’s relation to the world is not just a poetic, good-hearted way of seeing things but the basic truth. We are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it.”³⁸ All of life on earth comes from the same source and our fates are intertwined. Thus, our relationship with other kinds of life is most accurately described by a familial metaphor like kinship.³⁹

Johnson insists that even human intelligence and free will, two concepts which Christians have traditionally used to stress humanity’s distinctiveness, need not be taken as setting us apart from or above nature. “Human spirit expressed in self-consciousness and freedom is not something new added to the universe from outside,” she explains. “Rather, it is a sophisticated evolutionary expression of the capacity for self-organization and creativity inherent in the universe itself. . . . This makes us distinct but not separate, a unique strand in the cosmos, yet still a strand of the cosmos.”⁴⁰ Summing up her version of kinship anthropology, Johnson advocates for a concern for creation grounded in what we have in common:

If separation is not the ideal but connection is; if dualism is not the ideal but the relational embrace of diversity is; if hierarchy is not the ideal but mutuality is, then the kinship model more closely approximates reality. It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all. This kinship attitude does not measure differences on a scale of higher or lower ontological dignity but appreciates them as integral elements in the robust thriving of the whole.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

In kinship anthropology, then, the presumption of anthropocentrism is replaced by biocentrism. Instead of assigning mere instrumental value to other creatures, biocentric kinship recognizes that other species, which have themselves evolved over countless millennia, possess intrinsic value. Moreover, unlike the stewardship approach, kinship anthropology recognizes humanity's place within a larger ecosystem, focusing on the many qualities that we share. What makes us unique or distinctive need not negate the value or unique qualities of other species. Thus, in kinship anthropology, hierarchy and dualism are replaced by a humble appreciation for the stunningly diverse but nonetheless interconnected family of creation, with all the relational responsibilities that this entails.⁴²

Kinship and Anabaptist Relational Anthropology

Kinship anthropology not only is more consistent with the scientific worldview than stewardship but also offers a clearer way to make sense of the intuitions and impulses that many contemporary Anabaptists already have toward the environment, by graciously widening the boundaries of community to include all the creatures calling earth their home. As Klaassen suggests, "We are co-creatures with animals and trees, water and air, and cannot exist independently. If this understanding has not been part of our Anabaptist heritage from the beginning, we have the opportunity to make it part of our tradition and part of the tradition of Christian faith now, in our own time."⁴³ In light of the ecological crisis, he challenges Anabaptists to explore the possibility of adopting a new perspective toward the rest of creation.

However, this does not mean abandoning core beliefs or introducing new ones. Instead, it means looking deeply into the principles that Anabaptists already hold and applying them more holistically to one's entire way of living in the world. The challenge is to consider how traditional ways of practicing the faith can be enriched as they are applied to include the natural world. Doing so, I contend, reveals that even if it has not always been the case historically, the relational anthropology of the Anabaptist tradition is more at home theologically with kinship anthropology than with stewardship

⁴² Ibid., 38.

⁴³ Klaassen, "Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God," 153.

anthropology.

Kinship is a relational metaphor that shares common assumptions with Anabaptist anthropology, which tends to value human relatedness and mutual dependence over individualism or separation. From an Anabaptist perspective you cannot understand the nature or purpose of humanity merely by focusing on isolated individuals. To be fully human is to be in relationship with others. While this idea is not unique to Anabaptism, it is distinctive. Robert Friedmann summarizes this deeply relational anthropology as follows:

[In Anabaptism] the thesis is accepted that *man cannot come to God except together with his brother*. In other words, the brother, the neighbor, constitutes an essential element of one's personal redemption.... To him brotherhood is not merely an ethical adjunct to Christian theological thinking but an integral condition for any genuine restoration of God's image in man.... It has always been claimed that the brotherhood-church (*Gemeinde*) served a central function within Anabaptism. The reason for this was apparently that only in the *Gemeinde* can the believer apply Christian love in action. Only here can the believer realize his convictions that he cannot come to God in good conscience except with his brother. (Friedmann's italics)⁴⁴

Many Anabaptists, both past and present, have understood that humans were created by God to be in relationship with others, and, as Friedmann points out, even the image of God is reflected not in individuals alone but people together in loving communities. Salvation too is understood in communal terms. As J. Denny Weaver says, "reconciliation between individuals belongs as much to the essence of salvation as does reconciliation to God, and the two dimensions exist together inseparably."⁴⁵ C. Norman Kraus concurs, noting that "in the traditional Mennonite understanding, salvation was experienced as a belonging to, and relationship in, the religious community."⁴⁶ Thus, for Anabaptists, salvation can never be spiritualized or

⁴⁴ Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 81.

⁴⁵ J. Denny Weaver, "Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986): 173.

⁴⁶ C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Theology for the Disciple Community," in *Kingdom, Cross and*

abstracted from real relationships to others.

As has long been recognized, human life is characterized by a network of relationships. People may find themselves in loving or destructive relationships. Many will have friends and some will have enemies, but regardless of the quality of the relationship, relating to others is an inescapably human condition. Believing that if people find themselves in favorable circumstances they can live righteous lives, Anabaptists have often attempted to create communities that prioritize right relationships between people through service to one another.⁴⁷ Focusing on Mennonite communities, Joseph Smucker observes that

[t]raditionally, and expressed in ideal terms, Mennonites have believed that the religious life can be practiced only within a community where self-will is submerged. The rules of behavior ... are designed to achieve a loving brotherhood rather than personal holiness. Such aims are, of course, antithetical to individualism. Seen in this light, the concept of 'community' demands 'service' of the individual. Thus, one's occupation should express service to the community. Through hard work, a community member demonstrates a greater concern for others than for self.... One's occupation is not to be pursued in order to gain personal wealth, power, or prestige but to benefit the community as a whole.⁴⁸

This aversion to individualism is rooted in the recognition that we are each deeply dependent on others for our being and well-being. Harold Bauman writes that while individuals freely enter into the community of believers, they do so with the understanding that each person will be responsible for the well-being of all others. He suggests that "the church is a covenant community of mutual responsibility. . . . Such a covenant is based upon the priesthood of all believers: each person is a minister for every other person. There is an interdependence upon one another which grows out of

Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger, ed. John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1976), 110-11.

⁴⁷ Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, 61-74.

⁴⁸ Joseph Smucker, "Religious Community and Individualism: Conceptual adaptations by one group of Mennonites," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 3 (1986): 274.

an intimate caring, prompted by the love shed abroad by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹ In communities like those described by Smucker and Bauman, interdependence is cultivated in order to strengthen relational ties, and equality is defined in terms of one’s responsibilities to the community.

As these sources indicate, a common feature of Anabaptist anthropological reflection is an emphasis on the relational nature of human beings. This focus has motivated historical and contemporary Anabaptist communities to experiment with (if not always achieve) forms of communitarianism, mutual interdependence, and egalitarianism in responsibilities, under the principle that everyone is accountable for the needs of all others.⁵⁰ According to this relational anthropology, the key to human fulfillment and the medium of salvation is taking responsibility to live in right relationships with others, even by loving enemies and strangers, who do not or cannot reciprocate.

Kinship as an *Anabaptist* Ecological Anthropology

Anabaptist theological reflection has a lot to say about community, but its scope is often limited to the church, the *community of believers*. What relevance, then, does Anabaptist communal anthropology have in relation to the rest of our human and extra-human kin, especially in light of the ecological crisis? J. Denny Weaver provides a partial answer, suggesting that

[w]hen envisioning society as a whole, the communal component of the Anabaptist tradition provides an alternative to . . . individualism. . . . The believing community should remind the broader society as a whole of the humanity of all individuals, and should testify that the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the powerless rather than the powerful. The communal-oriented church calls attention to the common good, and to the solidarity of the human race.⁵¹

This vision of human community is inspiring as far as it goes, but I

⁴⁹ Harold E. Bauman, “Forms of Covenant Community,” in Burkholder and Redekop, *Kingdom, Cross and Community*, 123-24.

⁵⁰ Despite the ideal of equality, the exercise of power in leadership has rarely been egalitarian in practice. This has especially been true for women. See note 28 above.

⁵¹ Weaver, “Becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite,” 174.

suggest that the awareness of human interdependence with all life on earth made possible by kinship anthropology allows an expansion of Weaver's principle to creation as a whole. If the believing community is to bear witness to the 'humanity of all individuals,' then it can also bear witness to the intrinsic value of all creation. If the community should testify that 'the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the powerless,' then this also includes other creatures, many of whom today are at our mercy. As Sallie McFague says, "Christians are those who should love the oppressed, the most vulnerable of God's creation, for these are the ones according to the Gospel who deserve priority.... [N]ature can be seen as the 'new poor,' not the poor that crowds out the human poor, but the 'also' poor; and as such it demands our attention and care."⁵² Kinship anthropology recognizes that the common good of humanity cannot be separated from the common good of all who live on our planet, and solidarity can extend even to those not of our species.

While Weaver expands the boundaries of Anabaptist relational anthropology to other humans, Calvin Redekop, in his essay "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," considers what relevance it might have to all our kin on earth. With respect to other humans outside the faith community, he says that "Shalom cannot be limited to life within the congregation, the outpost of the kingdom of God; it must permeate the larger community. It means that Christians will work there for the community and creative well-being that is already being achieved in the church."⁵³ He draws a clear analogy between the reconciling relationship that Anabaptists strive for in the church community and the responsibilities of Anabaptists toward their fellow humans. But he doesn't stop there. Recognizing how deeply interdependent humans are with the natural world, he extends Anabaptist relational responsibilities to all of creation.

Redekop suggests that since God created the world and declared it to be good, the rest of creation must have an intrinsic value of its own: "there is a God-creation relationship in which the human being may not be the central

⁵² Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 6.

⁵³ Calvin Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (July 1986): 402.

figure.”⁵⁴ He reasons that if Anabaptists affirm that the creation is good and every part of it is interdependent, then it “forces us to expand the ethic of nonresistance . . . from the community of faith . . . to the larger ecological community.”⁵⁵ The expansion of this ethic to all of creation significantly heightens Anabaptists’ responsibilities toward the natural world:

The import of this ethic is that it extends the “reverence for life” of humankind to that of the natural world, both organic and inorganic. Nonresistance—the respect for human life that God has created—is thus extended to respect for everything that God has created.... The positive aspect (respect for God’s creation) and the negative aspect (being forbidden to destroy life) thus work together to caution humans not to usurp God’s position or to think of themselves as equal with God.⁵⁶

Here Redekop claims that the ethic of non-resistance, which he defines as the respect or reverence for life, should be expanded to include the whole of the natural world – organic and inorganic. All species, life-systems and even minerals must be respected. They each have intrinsic value because God created them good.

Redekop suggests an ethic that fits well with kinship anthropology. On the one hand, it recognizes the deep interdependence between all life on earth, including human life, as affirmed by the scientific worldview. On the other, it draws directly from the Anabaptist tradition of relational community. Redekop merely expands the boundaries of community in response to the growing awareness that human actions do impact the lives of others around the world. He says, “solidarity with the rest of creation is bound to include, first and foremost, compassion for the neighbor, not only in the church but everywhere. To be obedient to God means that I must love my brother and sister, for God has created them and to destroy them would be to destroy part of God’s creation.”⁵⁷ While this passage seems to privilege human life over other life (kinship anthropology contends that compassion and love are not zero-sum games, the flourishing of other life need not come at the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 395.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 396.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 397.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 398-99.

expense of human life and vice versa), it is still evocative. If what is meant by 'neighbor' and 'brother and sister' were all of life on earth and not just our fellow-humans, then Redekop's statement would be an elegant formulation of kinship as an Anabaptist ecological anthropology.

As with any metaphor, kinship can have problematic shades of meaning. It can sometimes evoke notions of tribalism, suspicion of outsiders, and nepotism at the expense of others. Just as Loewen's analysis demonstrated there is more than one way of defining 'stewardship', there are also problematic ways of defining 'kin'. Family is a concept that can be far too easily sentimentalized. As inherently conservative social institutions, family structures can often be deeply patriarchal. Moreover, families can be dysfunctional, abusive, or violent. Yet, while recognizing the limits of this metaphor, kinship can still evoke a deeper truth about who we are as human beings than stewardship anthropology can, since in this case kinship is used not to exclude but to include. Our 'kin' amount to all of life on earth, and the whole of the universe itself. By recognizing that we are all related, we can broaden the sense of loyalty and responsibility often reserved for immediate relatives to our extended family.

What difference might adopting this sort of kinship anthropology have on how Anabaptists and other Christians live in the world? Elizabeth Johnson, in her essay "God's Beloved Creation," suggests that it challenges us to *see* the world and *live* in it in a new way. Rather than looking at the world with an "arrogant, utilitarian stare" that objectifies nature and commodifies other creatures, kinship offers an imaginative framework that can enable us "to see the natural world as God does, with a loving and appreciative eye."⁵⁸ By gazing at the world with the love of God, the scales fall from our eyes, and we see that as an integral part of the world (not apart from it), we are loved by God as well.⁵⁹ While much of this essay has been an argument in favor of just this possibility, acknowledging relational ties with an extended family of creation is more than an intellectual exercise; it involves a new way of living.

This new way of living can have at least two dimensions: the ascetic and the prophetic. According to Johnson, to live ascetically is to practice

⁵⁸ Johnson, "God's Beloved Creation," 10.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 63.

discipline in the use of the earth's resources. However, unlike medieval ascetic practices, ecological asceticism seeks not to flee the world but to live in it in more responsible ways. While the concept of asceticism may be foreign to many contemporary Anabaptists, the closely related notion of simple living is not.⁶⁰

Simple living is not just about giving things up, and should not be a rigid or austere practice for its own sake. Instead, living without excess is the condition for the possibility of generosity toward others. Ecological asceticism affirms the common good of all life on earth, recognizing that only if I live on what I need will others have what they need as well. Johnson suggests a simple living in which we “fast from shopping, contribute money and time to ecological works, endure the inconvenience of running an ecologically sensitive household and conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or black.”⁶¹

Additionally, Johnson challenges those convinced by kinship anthropology to respond prophetically, to take action to bring about environmental justice. For Christians this means applying God's commandments consistently to all of creation. She says, for instance, “If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then the range of neighbors now includes the whale, the monarch butterfly, the local lake—the entire community of life. . . . ‘Save the rain forest’ becomes a concrete moral application of the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”⁶² For Anabaptists, who have a long history of counter-cultural beliefs and practices, this sort of prophetic response has broad application. For example, how could the Sermon on the Mount be applied to the entire earth community?⁶³ From a kinship perspective, “one stringent criterion must now measure the morality

⁶⁰ On the influence of medieval asceticism on early Anabaptist spirituality, see Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study of Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974).

⁶¹ Johnson, “God's Beloved Creation,” 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³ For example, in order to fulfill the commandments not to kill and to love one's neighbor and enemy, Gary Comstock and Kristin Johnston Largen, respectively, each suggest a form of ethical or religious vegetarianism. Cf. Gary Comstock, “Must Mennonites be Vegetarians?” *The Mennonite*, June 23, 1992, 273; and Kristin Johnston Largen, “A Christian Rationale for Vegetarianism,” *Dialog* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 147-57.

of our actions: whether or not these contribute to a sustainable earth community. A moral universe limited to the human community no longer serves the future of life.”⁶⁴

Conclusion

The many symptoms of the ecological crisis such as overconsumption, population growth, polluted air and water, the destruction of ecosystems, and the extinction of species are serious problems that humanity can no longer ignore. However, they will be difficult to solve if people do not recognize that the crisis itself is primarily one of human self-understanding. The metaphors that individuals, cultures, and religious communities use to imagine who they are and why they are here impact the way they relate to the environment. The dominant paradigm today – an imperialistic anthropology that is both deeply anthropocentric and hierarchical in relation to the rest of creation – has become a destructive force and needs to be replaced.

Stewardship anthropology, while well-meaning, is problematic because it continues to rely on a hierarchical dualism that divides humans from other creatures and assigns higher value to one at the expense of the others. When human dignity is based on qualities distinguishing humans from the rest of creation, it too easily reduces the earth’s life-systems to assets to be managed, or it subtly equates human interest with God’s interest. By retaining the same questionable assumptions held by the imperialistic anthropology it tries to correct, stewardship simply imagines humans as kinder, gentler hierarchs.

In contrast, kinship anthropology draws on insights from modern science that recognize the common origins and interrelatedness of all life on earth. While our species is distinct, human beings are still a part of the larger ecosystem. The earth is truly our home and other creatures are in reality our extended genetic family. From a biocentric perspective, kinship recognizes the intrinsic value of other creatures, acknowledging that humans have a moral responsibility that includes but is not limited to our own species. Moreover, since the kinship metaphor emphasizes our relatedness and interdependence with the rest of the world, it also resonates with Anabaptist anthropology, which has traditionally thought of human beings in relational terms. Identifying loving relationships as the locus of the image of God

⁶⁴ Johnson, “God’s Beloved Creation,” 11.

and human salvation, Anabaptists have attempted to create communities that prioritize mutual interdependence, equality in responsibility, and the common good.

Kinship anthropology has great promise for Anabaptist reflection in light of the ecological crisis. By affirming the dignity of all creation, it calls Anabaptists to an expansive moral vision, to seek ways to live without violence toward all creation, not just human beings. Widening the notion of community to include the entire ecosphere, an anthropology of kinship challenges people to live as loving relatives and good neighbors to all life on the planet.

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REFLECTION

God-as-Potter, Creativity, and a Theology of Art-Making

Chad R. Martin

We exercise great freedom in who God is now permitted to be among us.

–Walter Brueggemann¹

I

Two personal anecdotes point out the purpose of this essay. Every Sunday of my childhood my family attended a progressive Mennonite church that formed my initial understandings of the positive role of women in the life of the church. It was the 1980s, and inclusive language symbolized this congregation's commitment to equality between men and women in the life of the church. On many pages of our homemade songbook male pronouns and phrases were crossed out and hand-scrawled inclusive alternatives filled the margins. We sang these alternatives with conviction and consistency. I grew up with a vivid and visual assumption that God was not (just) a "he." Having come of age in this context, I take this active work of reimagining and developing images for God to be a vital task for Christian theology.

In 2011 I was approached by a church institution about a fundraising dinner planned with the theme "Shaped by God." The organizers were looking for a potter to create a visual display inspired by verses in Jeremiah 18: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" says the LORD. "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand." I was asked to contribute some handmade pottery, broken shards, and raw pots in process. Probably most church-going potters have received a similar

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Imagination of Walter Brueggemann." Interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, American Public Media, December 22, 2011. <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/prophetic-imagination/transcript.shtml>

invitation at some time. Many are asked to throw pots on a potter's wheel during worship as a lively illustration of the story from Jeremiah. However, worship planners rarely stop to ask deeper theological questions about how God is or is not like a potter, or about how human beings are or are not like clay. The appropriateness of the metaphor is usually presumed to be self-evident.

As these anecdotes show, I have come to take seriously the complexity of metaphorical language about God. Sallie McFague charts a path for what I consider one of the most urgent and relevant theological tasks of our time:

A metaphor is a word or phrase used *inappropriately* [original emphasis]. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of a chair, war as a chess game, God the father.... it is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.... Metaphor always has the character of “is” and “is not”: an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition.... It is precisely the patchwork, potpourri character of the Hebraic and Christian Scriptures with their rich flood of images, stories, and themes – some interweaving and mutually supportive, and others disparate, presenting alternative possibilities – that gives Christian theologians “authority” to experiment.²

This “authority” to experiment with metaphors and language about God is perhaps the most important theological task for the 21st century. My recent years of pastoral ministry have only bolstered my opinion in this regard. Week in and week out I stand before a congregation groping for words that mediate between their world and the world of the Bible. We all live in a time of rapidly changing information, technology, and scientific discovery, not to mention unprecedented devastation by human hands. In the midst of this, many churches have presumed the goal of their ritual life to be the preservation of ancient metaphors. Instead, I experience people longing for new images, metaphors, and rituals to discover God present in the world they live in today.

² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 44.

In this essay I hope to contribute to this sacred task of re-imagining. I propose that interdisciplinary dabbling with educational theory and artists' experiences alongside biblical studies and theology – a sort of midrashic treatment of the text – opens fresh understanding and deeper meaning within metaphoric language. What follows is informed as much by my own work as a potter and the input of other potters as it is by formal theology and biblical studies. The inherent dabbling quality of this experimenting comes with some risk, but there is nothing left to be done but to dabble boldly – and be willing to humbly recant when proven the fool!

I intend to show that by both paying attention to the details of the Jeremiah story and exploring the creative potential of the central metaphor – while at the same time considering modern-day artists' experiences of the ceramic process – we can find important images of God. What I offer are three angles of conversation with the story, reflecting my experience of the text shaped most significantly by my own training and practices as a potter. My hope is that these three angles not only open deeper insight into the possibilities of the God-as-potter metaphor, but serve as a model for interdisciplinary re-imagining and creating of images for the divine relevant to people of faith and the life of the church in this century.

II

The orienting point for this exercise, Jeremiah 18:1-11, has become a cherished story for me, and a compelling metaphor for God. On the one hand, its frequent misunderstanding, or at least its downplayed complexity, exposes the church's tendency to read metaphorical language about the divine too narrowly. On the other, since I am a potter, I see rich layers of meaning in the story ripe for further theological reflection. We can begin to grasp this richness by first reading the story the way I read it as a potter.

The episode may have unfolded something like this. It began with a call to the prophet: "Come, let us go down to the potter's house." Jeremiah is one of the Bible's vivid characters. He was eccentric, did things his own way, and had some laughable moments – including being thrown into a pit, buying a junk piece of land that everyone knew would only be ransacked by the Babylonians, and wearing a yoke around town. But his actions invariably discomfited people, because in some strange way they revealed what was

true about their world.

So, Jeremiah walked down to the potter's "house." In Jeremiah's day making pots took a lot of space. Under the cover of a cave, tent, or tree, the potter likely would have been working in a modest space with only a wheel, a jug of water, a few scattered tools, and maybe a couple of shelves to set wet pots on. Nearby would have been a pit for treading raw clay to mix it with the right amount of water and to work out as many impurities as possible. Surrounding this, I picture piles and piles of pots. Some of these piles were fired and finished wares waiting to sell at market. But also needed was an area for pots to dry in the sun and for a heap of broken pots and shards. Somewhere in the middle of all this would be at least a pit, and perhaps a brick structure, serving as a kiln where a huge mound of pots would be fired at once. Adjacent to the kiln were stacks of firewood, or dried dung when wood was scarce, stockpiled for the next firing. In a city like Jerusalem, perhaps these areas and tasks were a bit more specialized and centralized as a whole guild of potters likely worked shoulder to shoulder with adjacent shops.

I suspect this was what Jeremiah walked into, a vast yard where the endless piles of pots spoke immediately of both the potter's production and of his failure, experimentation, and much sweat equity. Maybe on another day the potter would have been carting clay up from the riverbeds. Or, on a firing day, dark smoke would have curled up from the 2,000-degree kiln. But on the day recorded in the text, Jeremiah found the potter working diligently at the wheel.

Given what is described, the potter worked on a "fast" wheel (this tool features a flywheel at the base, connected by an axle to another wheel that holds the clay and sits at a comfortable working level). The potter had to kick the flywheel methodically with one foot to make the wheel head spin at a good speed for working the clay. This method was one of the technological advances of the period, and has remained in continuous use for thousands of years.

I picture a scene I have witnessed hundreds of times: while kicking the wheel with one foot, the potter grabbed a lump of clay, dropped it nearly on center in the middle of the wheel and began working it up and down with both hands. Then suddenly in one quick, fluid motion he pushed the clay

into a perfectly rounded mound in the center of the wheel, opened a small hole in the middle with his thumbs, and began pushing the walls of the pot upward. With three or four more pulls, and both hands working in tandem on the inside and outside of the growing cylinder, he stretched the clay as tall as it could get. In the potter's hands, the clay cylinder still appeared sturdy, but perhaps Jeremiah knew that the slightest slip of a finger in the wrong direction could tumble the clay back down to a formless blob.

Many who have watched this activity, whether trained as potters or not, feel a touch of magic in it. It happens with such quickness and ease of movement – the clay, potter, and wheel all work as one machine for a moment – that it seems more like a performance, a dance that can scarcely be captured with words or a snapshot.

Then, just as the prophet caught his breath, the potter started shaping the cylinder into a discernible form. Perhaps the potter continued by rocking back in his seat for a brief second, sizing up the still-spinning tower, kicked the wheel a time or two more, and then leaned in to stretch the pot into shape. This one, a cylinder so tall he could barely reach his arm in all the way to the bottom, gradually got rounded out to the form of a large water jar. After smoothing the outside surface of the bulbous jar, the potter swiftly cut a cord underneath the pot to separate it from the wheel head. He lifted it from the wheel, and set it in the dirt beside the wheel to dry a bit before adding a handle.

We can picture Jeremiah watching for an hour or so as the potter created a series of six or eight of these large jars. Some took form as swiftly and effortlessly as the first. With others, the potter's hands revealed a chunk of hard clay or a bit of gravel that slipped through in the prepared clay and left a hole in the wall of the pot. Or, playing to his audience, the potter stretched the walls of the jar a bit too far, trying to make a more magnificent form than the soft clay allowed. With surprisingly little frustration, he took a breath and began kneading the lump of mushy clay right on the wheel head to be reused. Jeremiah likely noticed how effortlessly the potter recovered from such a failure and kept working.

How much did Jeremiah know about the process? I have a hunch he knew more than just what he saw that day. Perhaps he understood that the process of adding a handle might spoil a jar or two, that some forms might

be cast aside because they were not shapely enough to meet the potter's discriminating standards, and that some inevitably would not survive the precarious process of firing where the tenuous mud became (again somewhat miraculously) stone-like. Perhaps he knew that the potter chose to work with a creative level of risk which would likely mean some pots could result in a pile of shards.

On that day, the process of the potter's art struck the prophet as a profound metaphor for the activity of God in the world. He surmised that God's creative relationship with humanity was something like the potter's creative relationship to the clay. God worked ceaselessly for the well-being of humanity but some people fell short of God's best intentions. Jeremiah saw in the beautiful forms of freshly thrown clay jars an image akin to the beauty of people who act righteously. The potter who critiqued the aesthetic value of his own pots was quick to cherish some or rework others. Likewise, God was critiquing the moral value of divinely created humanity and was quick to act dramatically in judgment where people failed to act justly.

III

I fell in love with working with clay long before I fell in love with doing theology in any rigorous way, and long before I ever stumbled across the story from Jeremiah. When I first discovered this biblical, theological metaphor employing an analogy from the ceramic process, it resonated with my experience and communicated special meaning. However, I have discovered in conversation with friends and colleagues that, for many, the story has contributed to narrow interpretations of God. It smacks of too much pre-determinism, depicts a heavy-handed God who displays little compassion, and confines God to an overly simple anthropomorphic caricature that fails to do justice to the mystery of the divine reality. A careless reading of the text may indeed lead to such a theological viewpoint, but this is a misunderstanding of the primary analogy featured in the story.

To begin, I must take stock of the basic analogy recorded in Jeremiah 18. At first glance, we could easily take the God-as-potter metaphor to fit the stereotype of an Old Testament deity who is vengeful and retributive, emotionally indifferent, and in whose hands people are nothing but putty

waiting to be shaped. Certainly the story's closing warning is dreadful: "Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you." Potter Dick Lehman explains how casual readers can arrive at a serious misapprehension here: "People assume they know a lot about pottery . . . from Jeremiah. They jump to theological certainty; they think Jeremiah was a technical manual for pottery-making, but [this text] is not a complete metaphor for God."³ An important step toward a deeper reading is to acknowledge there is much to the ceramic process, and therefore to the metaphor, that is not visible on the surface of the text.

I will return to that issue shortly, but the text itself also offers clues of more layers of relationship. Many of the Old Testament texts using the cluster of Hebrew words related to pottery (*ysr*) offer a theological picture of God "shaping" history according to "a kind of predestination."⁴ While this is true of Jeremiah 18, the text does suggest a more nuanced relationship between God and humanity than the stereotype noted above. As Walter Brueggemann points out, "the metaphor of potter and clay leads us to expect an unambiguous assertion of Yahweh's sovereignty. The argument that follows, however, is much more subtle."⁵

To follow Brueggemann's thinking, we must pay careful attention to the details of the text in vv. 7-10, which uses an if/if/then sequence to depict the relationship: *If* I (God) say this . . . but *if* a nation does that . . . *then* I (God) will change my mind. "The 'then' expresses Yahweh's readiness to act in new ways in response to Israel's new behavior. In both sequences the first 'if' is God's initial decision either to plant or to pluck up. The second 'if' celebrates Israel's freedom. Israel is not fated but can act in new ways."⁶

Brueggemann's observation begins to show the complexity of the God/human relationship depicted in the chapter. Further, we might better

³ Dick Lehman, telephone interview with the author, January 19, 2006. An internationally recognized potter and author on ceramics, Lehman pursued theological studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary for several years.

⁴ B. Otzen, "Yasar, yeser, sur, sir, sura," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 264.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25*, Pt. 1 of 2, *International Theological Commentary*, vol. 24 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

understand this complexity by learning something about how potters see their relationship to their clay. As will soon become clear, the potter's work is not simply to manipulate inanimate, lifeless clay. Instead, it depends on a transactional, intimate relationship.

In my experience, potters rarely think of their material as just mud to be manipulated. All clay embodies a long history before it ever reaches the workshop. Clay particles evolve during a painstakingly long geological process of grinding, wearing, sorting, and shifting, along with mixing with all kinds of decaying organic matter, that results in diverse kinds of clay⁷ – some stretchy and plastic, some gritty and durable, some a pale gray hue, some a rich red – that are more or less suitable for certain methods of pot-making and various kinds of ceramic products.

Potters must be aware of this profound story, at some level, and take advantage of the wide variety of physical properties of different clay bodies in order to work appropriately with the material. This requires knowledge of, and respect for, the clay. As many a novice potter will attest, clay seems to take on a life of its own. Potters translate this respect and awe into a relationship with their material that becomes personal; they engage in a give-and-take relationship with it, shaping and manipulating it. But they also respond to the material intuitively, acknowledge its specific character, learn from it – and ultimately have only so much power over it. As the relationship deepens, it takes on a quasi-spiritual character. Perhaps Jeremiah realized this millennia ago. Certainly modern potters have.

Pinching slowly, we know clay *slow* and *savour* [sic] in our sensitive hands. Our connection with it deepens: from I-it to I-thou, as Martin Buber suggests. From a consciousness of praise for what clay will allow us to do with her, we ripen into a consciousness of who she is, of the story she carries: from our expressiveness to receiving hers [original emphasis].⁸

Paulus Berensohn shows the weight of this valuable relationship for the potter. Other ceramic artists make similar claims about their process that,

⁷ See Daniel Rhodes, *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*, 3rd ed., revised and expanded by Robin Hopper (Iola, WI: Krause, 2000), 26.

⁸ Paulus Berensohn, *Finding One's Way With Clay: Creating Pinched Pottery and Working with Colored Clays*, 25th anniversary ed. (Dallas: Biscuit Books, 1997), 159.

when read against Jeremiah 18, point out an understanding of the potter-clay relationship that is a more nuanced and perhaps more appropriate metaphor of the God-human relationship. One artist says, “Now, as I confront the clay, I am also confronting myself. I try to pay attention to how the clay feels; I listen to my clay, as I want it to cooperate with me at each stage of creation. . . . In a transactional relationship, two or more organisms make contact and communicate. When they disengage and part, both are changed in some way.”⁹ Thus, the potter is not *immutable* (just as God in the Old Testament is willing to change in response to engagement with humanity).

Also, the potter is not *all-powerful* in regards to the clay, contrary to how I have almost always heard Jeremiah interpreted. The specific character of the material limits how one can manipulate it. Says M.C. Richards:

You can do very many things with [clay], push this way and pull that, squeeze and roll and attach and pinch and hollow and pile. But you can't do everything with it. You can go only so far, and then the clay resists.... And so it is with persons. You can do very many things with us: push us together and pull us apart and squeeze us and roll us flat, empty us out and fill us up. You can surround us with influences, but there comes a point when you can do no more. The person resists, in one way or another.... His own will becomes active.¹⁰

The experiences and testimonies of other potters mirror my own journey with clay. This journey and their voices lead me to contend the God-as-potter metaphor described by the prophet is an I-Thou, relational image characterized by intimacy and reciprocity that affects growth and change for both the clay and the divine potter.

IV

Sallie McFague contends that theological metaphors have an “is” and “is not” character. This is true of Jeremiah’s God-as-potter image as well,

⁹ Martin Astor, “Psychology of Mud,” in *Ceramics Monthly* 44:8 (1996): 102.

¹⁰ M.C. Richards, *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry and the Person*, 25th anniversary ed., with foreword by Matthew Fox (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1989), 19.

and we can do justice to it only by clarifying the “is not” character of the metaphor. Gordon Kaufman’s work indirectly points out some of the ways theologians presume God is not like a potter. Most important, he cautions, even exhorts, against the tradition’s tendency to anthropomorphize God. Thus, my second angle for reading the text invites scrutiny for the sake of opening the metaphor’s possibilities. Kaufman states provocatively that “it is no longer possible . . . to connect in an intelligible way today’s scientific, cosmological and evolutionary understandings of the origins of the universe and the emergence of life (including human life and history) with a conception of God constructed in the traditional anthropomorphic terms.”¹¹ This would seem to rule out the God-as-potter metaphor. But if we can treat both Kaufman’s theology and the biblical text somewhat playfully, I find something compelling emerges when we hold the two side-by-side.

Kaufman argues that postmodern theology should turn away from personal images of God, and emphasize the mystery and unknowable character of the divine. To this end, he sets forth the idea of God as “serendipitous creativity” instead of divine creator (i.e., potter). He articulates a definition of creativity that is common if not universal (note where I have added emphasis):

The idea of creativity, however (in contrast with the notion of a creator) – *the idea of the coming into being through time of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel* – continues to have considerable plausibility today; indeed it is bound up with the very belief that our cosmos is an evolutionary one in which new orders of reality come into being in the course of exceedingly complex temporal developments.¹²

Kaufman adds nuance to this definition by emphasizing a quality of creativity that is very important to his theological construction – the quality of serendipity. To clarify what he means by serendipity, again note my emphasis in this statement of his:

¹¹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 53. Kaufman, who died in 2011, indicated that in retrospect much of his theological work had been moving toward this conclusion. See 107-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 55.

There is a serendipitous feature in all creativity: *more happens than one would have expected, given previously prevailing circumstances, indeed, more than might have seemed possible....* The most foundational kind of creativity for us today, therefore, appears to be that exemplified in the evolution of the cosmos and of life, rather than that displayed in human purposive activity. Though we can describe the evolutionary model with some precision, it in no way overcomes the most profound mystery at the root of all that is: Why is there something, not nothing? Why – and how – can the new actually come into being in the course of time?¹³

Thus, when Kaufman speaks of serendipitous creativity, we should take him to be stressing qualities of *newness/novelty* and *unexpectedly more*.

Creativity abounds. In fact, considering the humble origins of the universe, this abundance of the new and novel is highly unlikely, unexpected, and unexplainable. To argue that a personal agent called God is directing or coercing this abundant creativity is simplistic. But to argue that God is somewhere in the midst of such creativity, of such tipping points, helps make sense of the world. Such an image of God is hard to pin down – for Kaufman, intentionally so. In my view, the best we can do is hint at where, who, or what God is. God attends to, participates in, persuades, catalyses, or simply *is* the tipping point where “the present order gives way to a new better-adapted order.”¹⁴

Now it may be quite a leap from this excursus back to Jeremiah. For we must look long and hard through Kaufman’s work to find any conversation about the arts, despite all his talk of creativity, let alone any attention to pottery and what it might have to do with God. So I may be embarking on too loose a reading of his perspective. But indulging the “authority to experiment,” I want to play with the pottery-making metaphor in light of Kaufman’s notion of serendipitous creativity. One tactic for undercutting overly narrow readings of the Jeremiah text is to shift vantage points on the story entirely – something like rotating it 90 degrees. Again, this is like midrash, but we do this too infrequently.

¹³ Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

Consider such questions as these: Where *is* God in the story? The prophet, one day, found God in the image of the potter. But might God be in the mysterious process of creating new and beautiful forms? Or in the challenging work of turning dry clay to vitreous stone in the kiln? Granted, now we move afield from what we find in the written text. But the questions are worth asking for the sake of a better understanding of metaphors about clay.

For example, I suggest that the process of wood-firing pots is an appropriate analogy for Kaufman's metaphor of divine serendipitous creativity. Pots fired in this way have wildly dynamic surfaces ranging from crusty gray and brown to glassy green and blue. Unlike some other more controlled and precise glazing and firing processes, wood-firing, with the resulting ashy glaze, is imprecise, and the potter allows the whim of the kiln atmosphere to primarily determine the final surface decorations of the pots. An experienced wood-firer can manipulate the kiln atmosphere by using particular kinds of wood for fuel (different species of wood produce different colors of melted ash), varying the length of firing (typically anywhere from 24 hours to 15 days), making pots from clay specifically suited to the process, regulating air flow to foster either a smoky or a clean atmosphere, or arranging the pots in the kiln to push the airflow and ash deposits into one place or another. Even so, this control is limited. The potter cannot determine the specific surface results or the subtle characteristics that differentiate a beautiful pot from a bland, uninspired, or even broken one. Some factors, such as the weather during the firing (barometric pressure affects the kiln atmosphere), are completely beyond the potter's control.

However, the relatively elusive, unpredictable work of the kiln firing is exactly what draws some potters to employ this process. One has said he thought he was not taking enough risks unless he was willing to lose as many as half the pots he put in the firing! This attitude he called "calculated carelessness."¹⁵ Dick Lehman puts into words how I have experienced this process (note how he spiritualizes it):

It is this *improbable and unlikely blend* of biology, chemistry,

¹⁵These notions come from a potter, Shiro Tsujimura, whose work I encountered years ago. I have long since lost track of exactly where I found these ideas and phrases, though they did come from articles about Tsujimura.

physics, and intentionality that leads me to a sense of reverence concerning these wood-fired forms. The arbitrary quality of the flames and the fuel sources create never-to-be-repeated surfaces that are rich with clues, hints, and information to the inquiring spirit.... I believe that one can never really *make* wood fired pottery and sculpture. One can only work alongside the trees and the clay and the flames ... and with the *others who are working with you* ... to *receive* the gifts of the kiln with awe and appreciation ... gifts of mystery and magic.¹⁶

This description of wood-firing is like the kind of serendipitous creativity Kaufman upholds as a metaphor for God. A potter can work hard to establish an atmosphere where desirable results are more likely to occur, or perhaps knows how to avoid situations where such results would be impossible. But in the end, the potter can neither say exactly how or why a particular pot turned out as it did, nor dictate such results. Thus, the chance results of a natural ash glaze surface created by the atmosphere of a wood kiln – where happy accidents can lead to new aesthetic categories – is perhaps like the way God is present in the cosmic, evolutionary, biohistorical trajectory of the universe. Might Jeremiah have had some inkling of this, given his visits to the potter's house?

V

When readers of the Jeremiah story focus too narrowly on their assumptions about how God is like a potter, they can easily miss one of its most valuable lessons. For me, the value of the story comes when we look at what is going on for the prophet, an angle usually overlooked. In the text, God tells Jeremiah, “Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words” (v. 2). God does not send him to the temple, the desert, or even the royal palace. Instead of a religious institutional setting, the prophet finds theological insight by venturing into the workspace of a craftsman – an artist's studio. Further, he does not find his insight by gazing at finished masterpieces but by observing a creative process. In fact, his theological

¹⁶ Dick Lehman, “Speaking the Language of the Soul” (2003). Available from www.dicklehman.com/html/writing. Accessed 23 August 2011. Emphasis added.

metaphor relies on watching the potter shaping vessels, critically analyzing their quality and reworking areas that need further attention. It depends on recounting the whole process, not just the finished product. The story invites us to appreciate the possibility of discovering theological insight not only in obvious or prescribed venues but in myriad creative and even unlikely situations. (Consider all the people who have come to know something about God by a serene walk in the woods or by losing themselves in a symphony performance.)

Theology of the academy can and should result not only from traditional scholarly activities such as research, writing, lectures and debates, but from activities that acknowledge a multiplicity of experiences, ways of learning, and intelligences that all serve a properly full knowledge of the complexity of the divine. This in fact is a time-honored approach in theology, but one that I urge us to revisit and take seriously in our discourse. My goal here is not to supplant the academy but to remind it of the theological assets of an array of disciplines and activities. From the earliest days of the church there have been streams of theology based more in experience than in rational discourse. As well, we can cite examples of modern theology shaped by the arts, beginning with Paul Tillich nearly a century ago. The image of God speaking in the midst of the potter's house is a vivid reminder of the varied ways theological understanding develops.

There are at least two distinct, if intersecting, ways the work of theology can be better informed by reintegrating experiential modes of learning and knowing. With the first I again admit to dabbling beyond my realm of expertise; what follows is more musing than attempting to prove. Before seminary I taught ceramics for several years – just long enough to bear witness to the transformative, world-altering possibilities when students create with their hands, not just learn with their heads. Educational theorist Howard Gardner explains what I saw intuitively, namely that people have multiple ways of knowing, what he calls “multiple intelligences.” This concept, he notes, “grew out of [the] belief and observations that there are various ways in which we as human beings come to know something and that learning involves the engagement of a variety of these capacities we possess . . . all people are alike in that they have these intelligences.”¹⁷ What has this to do

¹⁷ John M. Bracke and Karen B. Tye, *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003),

with theology? My hunch is that if there are various ways humans come to know something, then it stands to reason there are various ways they come to know about God, i.e., various ways they do theology.

Two of Gardner's seven intelligence categories show particularly how art-making, such as working with clay, fosters certain kinds of knowledge. First, spatial intelligence (sometimes named as visual-spatial) is vital to artistic creativity: "Certain other intellectual competences, such as facility in the control of fine motor movement, contribute as well; but the *sine qua non* of graphic artistry inheres in the spatial realm."¹⁸ Much of how Gardner describes this category has to do with art-making. But one element specifically might inform the intersection between art-making and theology, given that it echoes McFague's statement about the importance of understanding metaphor for theological development: "A final facet of spatial intelligence grows out of the resemblances that may exist across two seemingly disparate forms, or, for that matter, across two seemingly remote domains of experience. In my view, *that metaphoric ability to discern similarities across diverse domains derives in many instances from a manifestation of spatial intelligence* [emphasis added]."¹⁹

Gardner strikes on a key concept here. Artistic skills such as crafting coherent compositions and accurately representing real-life objects and images with a particular medium are closely related to abilities to form and understand metaphors or to transform one's reality toward a vision of something new. If I may leap into theological terms, a person's ability to comprehend metaphors (God is like this . . .), new or old, or to envision "a new heaven and a new earth," is directly related to visual-spatial abilities that can be fostered and developed through participation in art-viewing and art-making activities.

Another of Gardner's intelligence categories serves a similar purpose: bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, which involves motor skills. In explaining this concept, Gardner focuses mainly on such areas as dance, athletic prowess, and acting. But this category also includes "those individuals – like artisans, ballplayers, and instrumentalists – who are able to manipulate objects with

35-36, summarizing the educational theory of Howard Gardner.

¹⁸ Ibid., 196.

¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

finesse.”²⁰ Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, in addition to spatial intelligence, is a prime factor in art-making, especially with regard to craftsmanship like pottery-making.

This view of multiple intelligences impacts my concept of what theology can be. For, if theology, at least in some forms as advocated here, is an imaginative and metaphorical enterprise requiring creative vision, then the activities of art-making open different ways of knowing that are unattainable simply through “thinking” processes. Interestingly, Kaufman, who at first seems the quintessential rational thinker, appreciates how knowledge acquired through art-making will differ from, and can inform, other theological activities:

In [the arts], certain traditions of insight, skill and practice are transmitted and appropriated to help equip budding artists to create *the new*.... If we think of the arts primarily as traditions that are produced and carried on by artists/creators rather than traditions produced primarily *for consumers* (viewers, hearers), a somewhat different perspective comes into view [original emphases]. Instead of drawing on literature, painting, and music largely for illustrations to enhance our historical and theological teaching, what we would seek to learn from the history and practice of these and other arts would be the ways in which traditions can be appropriated *for the purpose of acting creatively in the world* [emphasis added].²¹

To speak of opening the theological task to more experiential realms invites a turn toward spirituality as well. Further, not only can art-making lead to unique kinds of knowledge, such experiential activities can also open mental/emotional spaces that nurture unique ways of knowing (about) God.

In my experience as a teacher and practitioner, making art can be like the Celtic notion of a “thin space”²² where boundaries dissolve between

²⁰ Ibid., 207.

²¹ Gordon D. Kaufman, “Theology, the Arts, and Theological Education,” in *Theological Education* 31, no. 1 (1994): 18.

²² I came to know this term through a reference by Marcus Borg: “Celtic Christianity speaks of ‘thin places.’ The metaphor has its home in a vision of reality that affirms that reality has at

ordinary and extraordinary, sacred and profane, human and divine. In this thin place, when people creatively engage and shape materials with their own hands, they experience the world and the divine differently than they do in other aspects of their everyday lives. M.C. Richards speaks of this reality when working with clay.

Experiences of the plastic clay and the firing of the ware carried more than commonplace values. Joy resonated deep within me, and it has stirred these thoughts only slowly to the surface. I have come to feel that we live in a universe of spirit, which materializes and de-materializes grandly; all things seem to me to live, and all acts to contain meaning deeper than matter-of-fact.... This seems to me to be a dialogue of the visible and the invisible to which our ears are attuned.²³

My understanding of this has been shaped by the practices of iconographers. Icon painters use prayer, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines to create a sacred context for their creative work, setting it apart from everyday life. With this approach, they serve a kind of priestly function, where creating liturgical artwork is much like mediating sacraments to a congregation. "In this context, the icon painter [has] to be a 'transformed person in order to be able to present in his work a transfigured being and a transfigured universe.' The artist does not design images, but unveils what is already there. . . . Consequently, the character and deportment of the painter [are] extremely significant."²⁴ Peter Pearson, an Episcopal priest, icon painter, and teacher, states how he employs such disciplines, particularly attending to his intentions and inner spiritual state when painting:

I have made thousands of people and situations part of the icons
I've painted by imagining them as individual brush strokes,

least two layers or levels or dimensions: the visible world of our ordinary experience, and the sacred, understood not only as the source of everything but also as a presence interpenetrating everything. In 'thin places' the boundary between the two levels becomes soft and permeable, the veil becomes diaphanous and sometimes lifts." See Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 250.

²³ Richards, 19.

²⁴ Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 82.

painting them into the icon. At other times, I've been so involved in the process of painting that I've not been aware of anything else and been surprised to discover that hours had passed. These are experiences of timelessness, of the eternal now. I've come to understand these as experiences of the Kingdom of God.²⁵

Pearson's observations take note of how a painter can create sacred space by intentionally infusing the creative work with prayerful meaning. But they also acknowledge that such time does not have to be rigidly defined; when one approaches the artistic task with a prayerful heart, a divine spark can break through regardless of one's thoughts, or lack thereof, in the moment.

Such examples show how art-making can work as a spiritual discipline, creating a thin place where the artist comes close to God and therefore comes to know God, "[overcoming] separateness and alienation by a knowing that *is* loving," as Parker Palmer says.²⁶ Such activity – or discipline or practice – surely bears theological importance. If we allow it to do so, as Kaufman suggests, then the creative and imaginative theological knowledge derived from art-making can orient and transform theological understanding. I believe that in the process of such creativity, in that thin place, glimpses of God and of "a new heaven and a new earth" break through mundane everyday life.

VI

I have suggested that we read the analogy of God-as-potter depicted in Jeremiah 18 with creativity and depth. By approaching the text from different angles I have tried to show that the central metaphor itself is not as straightforward as often presumed, that it takes on more richness when its "is not" qualities are mined for more insight, and that changing viewpoints to see what happens for the prophet in the story is inherently valuable. I dared to dabble across disciplines in search of a method more like midrash, approaching the story presuming there is more to it than meets the eye.

²⁵ Peter Pearson, *A Brush with God: An Icon Workbook* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 11.

²⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 8-9.

As a potter, I have a vested interest in the metaphor and images discussed here. But as my opening anecdotes hint, I take this exploration to be a model of a much broader enterprise. Let me indicate two paths forward from the conversation that I hope I have engaged. First, Kaufman is right to say the creative work of artists is valuable not so much for its illustrative qualities but because the ways artists learn and work could inform and open up theological processes. Others before me have undeniably begun this work in the last several decades, but there is much fodder here for new understanding, and vast space to bring artistic intelligences to bear on the biblical text.

Second, the task of opening and creating theological metaphors cannot be simply the work of professional theologians in the academy. Pastors as theologians must be willing to do this work from the pulpit in front of live, and hopefully lively, people. There in the congregational context we will learn with immediacy and clarity if our notions of God have anything worthwhile to do with real life. Sadly, too many of our images of God have reified into crusty shells of what they once were. May this conversation lead us to exercise great freedom in picturing who God is permitted to be among us.

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Charles E. Gutenson. *Christians and the Common Good: How Faith Intersects with Public Life*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011.

Charles Gutenson opens by recounting his upbringing in a “fundamentalist’ Christian tradition” that helped prevent him from seeing the “political implications of the life of Jesus” (2-3). Now older and wiser, he hopes to encourage a more holistic understanding of imitating Christ. Unlike typical Christian engagements with politics, Gutenson spends most of his six chapters discussing biblical interpretation. He begins by suggesting Christians can become better readers of scripture by avoiding proof-texting, appreciating context, trying to understand the motivations behind biblical commands, and “learning to read the entire Bible holistically” (52). Next, the author argues that scripture is first and foremost about God, not humanity, and that we need to understand God’s nature in order to discern God’s expectations for our lives together.

In chapter four, Gutenson embarks on a grand tour of the Bible, attempting to overcome the tendency to focus on “a small handful of favorite biblical texts . . . through which everything is understood” (82). Instead, he highlights passages in the Pentateuch and Prophets as well as the New Testament that demonstrate God’s concern for stewardship, justice, poverty, and even opportunities for rest. Chapter five opens with the common objection that religion is private, and even if God is concerned with the poor, governments need not be. Against this, Gutenson argues the Old Testament Years of Jubilee and Release “were not laws that God intended to apply only at some voluntary level” (127), and that in light of Romans 13 and Colossians 1, “It would be bizarre indeed to say that God has ordained the ruling powers to serve his intentions but excludes them from . . . care for the least of these” (129).

Gutenson contends that since God’s commands are given for human flourishing, Christians should be able to cast their arguments “in terms of the common good” (135). Nevertheless, the church needs to be careful to remain the church and not come to rely on politics. Finally, after a reminder that outcomes are more important than specific policies, the author turns to public policy. He speeds through a range of social issues – social safety nets, taxation and the minimum wage, race relations, healthcare, inheritance

and bankruptcy laws – before ending with homosexuality and abortion. He acknowledges his positions are “right of center theologically and left of center politically,” but his goal is not to prove any of them as the only Christian position (169). Rather, he hopes to begin a dialogue on “public institutions and their role in developing communities that live out God’s intentions” (170).

Gutenson’s book is clear, carefully argued, and easy to read, but even more impressive is his inviting style and method. As Christian discussions of politics in North America become increasingly polarized, agendas are quickly detected and dismissed. Gutenson, however, gently brings our attention back to the Bible and the character of the God revealed in it. By focusing on the interpretation and shape of the biblical narrative for most of his book, he skilfully models a kind of Christian dialogue about politics that does not immediately descend into sound-bites and proof-texts. This is a difficult achievement, and far more important than the details of his policy proposals, which lean to the left as suits his involvement with Sojourners. Still, because he intentionally leaves policies to the end and does not develop them in too much depth, even readers who do not share his politics may be persuaded to reconsider their stance.

Gutenson’s method also avoids the myopic focus on Jesus common to progressive Christian politics. Instead, he draws out the social vision of the OT so powerfully that when he arrives at Matthew 5, he can simply say, “What is Jesus asking in the Sermon that we have not seen already in our review of scripture?” (104). Throughout, his exegesis demonstrates how to read the Bible as a whole.

Christians and the Common Good might have benefited from additional historical analysis. In arguing against the stereotype that religion is private, Gutenson makes a brief reference to “classical Lockean liberalism” (124), but does not otherwise explore the political and social context of individualistic biblical interpretation. Still, he provides an excellent introduction to rediscovering the political import of the Bible, and his short, lightly footnoted volume is suitable for all audiences. I recommend it for undergraduate and adult education.

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R. Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung. *Taking Your Soul to Work: Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

Taking Your Soul to Work: Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace proposes an “eyes-open” as opposed to an “eyes-closed” spirituality. Co-authors Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung have teamed up to write a volume filled with real-life stories about workplace dilemmas and much practical advice on how to cultivate one’s spiritual life in the workplace. Stevens is no stranger to a theology of work, having authored numerous books and taught dozens of graduate-level courses on the subject over the years. More than that, he is an official “nonretiree” who believes working is a lifelong calling. Ung is a financial analyst who specializes in connecting his Christian faith to work.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One identifies nine soul-sapping workplace sins (e.g., pride, greed, lust, etc.) that hinder spiritual growth. Part Two names nine life-giving resources (e.g., joy, goodness, love, self-control, etc.) for workplace spirituality. Part Three describes nine outcomes (e.g., prayer, gratitude, purity) of cultivating spirituality at work.

Each chapter begins with a conversation between Stevens and Ung on a specific workplace theme like “pride” or its flipside, “joy.” Then they unpack the theme, drawing on the wisdom of the Christian scriptures and tradition, plus their own varied workplace experiences. Each chapter concludes with an action plan, case study, and/or reflection exercises designed to foster spiritual growth while one works.

This volume is a great resource for Christians who want to restore their spiritual passion and take their souls to work, and for pastors who want to learn how to encourage all God’s people to view their workplace as a legitimate arena for Christian ministry.

However, I do have a few problems with the book. First, I followed the authors’ advice and read it from beginning to end. But after reading Part One, the experience almost sucked the life out of my soul. It is an intense 55-page treatment of nine deadly workplace sins. Reading it non-stop is itself a soul-sapping experience. I would strongly encourage readers to alternate between reading a single chapter on one of the workplace sins like “pride” and then reading the chapter on its life-giving counterpart, namely “joy.” In fairness, the authors do suggest this approach as an option in their “How to

Use this Book” section.

Another problem I have relates to the question of the role of the Christian community in cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of believers. There is but a single mention of how communal identity as God’s people helps to cultivate, shape, and form the fruit of the Spirit in individual lives. Only once in the entire book (131) do the authors share an anecdote about a Christian man from Malaysia who mentored and disciplined fellow Christians, helping them manifest the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Not even in the crucial section about cultivating covenant relationships (84-85) do they point to the role of the Christian community in nurturing this virtue. They assume that it is up to individual Christians to cultivate spirituality at work.

However, as an evangelical Anabaptist, I believe it is almost impossible for individual Christians to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit apart from active participation in Christian community. We desperately need one another’s help as God’s people (as Stevens and Ung know very well). Consider, in this regard, Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).

In spite of these deficiencies, *Taking Your Soul to Work* is helpful for Christians who want to learn more about how to live into their identity as the people of God in today’s workplace. It would make an ideal volume for discussion in a church-based small group, thereby adding the essential communal resourcing that is needed in order to be Christians where we work, live, and play.

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John Howard Yoder. *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*. Edited by Christian E. Early and Ted G. Grimsrud. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010.

Recent years have witnessed the posthumous publication of a plethora of works written by Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Included among them is *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*. The main body of this book consists of six essays written by Yoder that were originally published in various journals and books between 1984 and 1999. These essays could be profitably read not only for their epistemological insights but also for their contribution to the fields of ecclesiology, ethics, missiology, and cross-cultural communication.

The book's title is somewhat misleading in that Yoder's personal investment was not in pacifism per se. Rather, his commitment was to a particular Christologically-informed vision of pacifism, which for him was synonymous with discipleship. In the prologue, the editors do, however, acknowledge the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ to Yoder's distinctive stance. The themes of particularity and contingency sound forth like a recurring drumbeat at regular intervals throughout the collection of essays. Emphasis is placed upon the particularity of the Jewish Messiah Jesus, the contingent character of the Gospel as "news," and the community-dependent status of all moral meaning.

Yoder's acute analytical skills are clearly on display when he turns his attention toward deconstructing the wisdom of "the wider world," in which appeals to universalism simply serve to disguise the fact that the wider world is always just another province. Yoder's insights in this area may prove particularly helpful to those ministering to students who have left home to enter into the wider world of the university. Unfortunately, the essays suffer from an unusual number of typographical errors which, although they do not obscure the course of the arguments, do threaten to become distracting.

Yoder's essays are bookended by a prologue and epilogue written by the editors. The prologue aims to correct several misconceptions surrounding Christian pacifism and seeks to introduce readers to its biblical and theological foundations. The epilogue helpfully draws together themes from the essays and insights from Yoder's broader corpus to provide a sketch

of “a pacifist way of knowing.” Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud maintain that in a world of convictional diversity it is Yoder’s holding together of epistemology and eschatology that allows him to think “through and beyond relativism” (136).

“Epistemology and eschatology,” say the editors, “infuse and support each other such that [what] makes the coming world real is the way in which human communities discover truth by resolving their differences” (134). This is embodied within Christian communities in the practices of the open meeting and witness. The open meeting or “Rule of Paul,” which grants everyone a voice as the community seeks to discern the Spirit’s leading in the meeting, recognizes the importance of the other to truth-finding. Witness is dependent upon an “evangelical” form of communication which recognizes that members of the Messianic community must vulnerably enter into the culture of the other. The disciple cannot enter into the new context armed with a “knock-down, drag ‘em out” argument, for that would be a denial of the vulnerability of their Master who in humility went to the cross. The Christian community must therefore reject coercive foundationalist and imperialist ways of knowing, which, whether motivated by pride or fear, nonetheless refuse to make themselves vulnerable to the other. Instead, generous patience and radical humility will characterize the epistemological outlook of those captured by a vision of the slain lamb who sits upon the throne.

True to their intentions, Early and Grimsrud have assembled a collection of essays that should assist Christian pacifists as they attempt to think through the epistemological implications of their convictions. The diversity of topics treated in this volume also makes it a leading candidate for those interested in finding a single source to stand as a companion piece to *The Politics of Jesus* in introducing the main contours of Yoder’s thought. Beyond both of these uses, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing* will, I hope, also stimulate Christian readers of other backgrounds and traditions to consider more thoughtfully what it means to be faithful disciples of the Prince of Peace.

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Miroslav Volf. *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011.

A Public Faith engages three central questions: How does the Christian faith “malfunction”? What does it mean for Christians to “live well”? How do Christians share the vision of “living well” with a diversity of others – particularly those of other faiths? (xvii). In the first three chapters, Miroslav Volf argues that faith should be prophetic. A prophetic faith requires followers to “ascend” in order to receive a message, but then “return” and convey it to others (9). When faith disproportionally favors or even eliminates “ascend” or “return,” it malfunctions.

Faith that is not malfunctioning influences the entire life of followers, including their approach to work and politics. Volf names this pervasive approach a “thick” faith (40). Countering claims that religion produces violence, he argues that what is needed for peace is more faith rather than less, and specifically more “thick” faith (40). Mennonites will hear many familiar sentiments in Volf’s description of a “thick” faith that leads to peace. The author includes love of God and neighbor, self-giving love for the sake of others, hospitality, forgiveness, and placing judgment and wrath solely into the hands of God. He further argues that most religions engage in peace building, but the media and the public fixate on the violence done in the name of religion rather than the peaceful acts (53).

Love of God and neighbor, mentioned in relation to a “thick” faith, also serves to answer Volf’s second question, concerning the definition of living well. Chapter four addresses this question and argues that living well requires Christians to love God and love neighbor (58). Only this way can followers of Christ flourish. Relying heavily on Augustine, Volf argues that loving God and neighbor results not only in our own joy but in compassionately seeking the well-being and well-living of others (71). The Christian hope that everyone should flourish and live well fuels missionary endeavors, and it answers Volf’s third question, how to engage with a diversity of perspectives.

When Christians love their neighbor, they should want to share the wisdom of how to live a flourishing life. Sharing it with others requires neither accommodation to, nor retreat from, the world, but dynamically engaging

culture (96). Engaging culture requires accepting some aspects of it while rejecting or transforming others (91-92). By engaging with culture, Christians recognize that they are both “givers” and “receivers” of wisdom (111). Acting as both giver and receiver grounds Volf’s vision for inter-religion dialogue, religion in the political sphere, and the relationship between church and state, discussed in chapter seven. The author argues that religions should neither seek a common ground nor emphasize their differences. The former leads to conformity, the latter removes all commonalities between religions (130). Instead, religions should practice “hermeneutical hospitality” in which they engage each other’s sacred texts, practice generosity, and live as “companions rather than combatants” (136). Religions will not all agree, but “the point is to help them argue productively as friends rather than destructively as enemies” (137).

Finally, in regard to the political realm, political structures cannot be devoid of religion, since attempts along that line merely replace religion with a different worldview, secularism (125). Instead, all perspectives, including those of secularism and various religions, need to speak in “one’s own voice” and bring “the wisdom of their own traditions to bear on public decisions and debates” (130).

Several aspects of this argument echo Mennonite history and theology. Volf seeks to root religion in love of neighbor and to make faith a part of all aspects of life, and he views faith as a source for peace rather than violence. He provides a particularly interesting conversation partner in seeking to understand and challenge Mennonites’ history of removing themselves from the world. Approaching faith as a combination of “ascent” and “return” brings together often highly debated aspects of Christianity such as spirituality, prayer, worship, mission, and service. The author’s analysis of faith malfunctions is perhaps the most thought-provoking element of this book: examining faith according to malfunctions would generate self-reflection for individual denominations or even specific church communities.

Nevertheless, Volf’s argument could have benefited from a more in-depth discussion of his visions for faith. In his approach to culture, for example, the author names slavery as a cultural aspect that Christianity rejected, but he does not adequately address Christianity’s long history of supporting it (92). His work could spark discussion in denominations and

individual churches, but his vision requires further development before implementation.

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John Kampen. *Wisdom Literature. Eerdmans Commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

John Kampen, Van Bogard Dunn Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Methodist Theological School in Ohio and a noted specialist in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, proposes in *Wisdom Literature* a remarkable treatment of the Qumran wisdom texts. The compositions examined are *Instruction*, *Mysteries*, *The Evil Seductress*, *Wisdom Composition*, *CryptA Words of the Makil to All Sons of Dawn*, *Sapiential-Didactic Work A*, *Ways of Righteousness*, *Instruction-Like Composition B*, *Beatitudes*, and *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

The book's introduction begins with a brief yet informative summary of the first forty years of research pertaining to the study of wisdom and wisdom literature at Qumran. This survey highlights the difficulty inherent in identifying whether a text is truly "sapiential" or not. In fact, much of the early work done on the Dead Sea Scrolls (hereafter "DSS") tended to dismiss any significant link between these texts and wisdom as such. Early researchers more readily tended to associate even such a seemingly sapiential word as "knowledge" with the texts of Gnosticism. As Kampen points out, the reluctance to connect these texts to the biblical wisdom tradition was essentially due to the relative scarcity of the word "wisdom" in the texts.

Following this survey, the author offers a detailed discussion of form-critical factors used to identify a DSS wisdom corpus. The relevance of this analysis is not limited to the study of the DSS but proves significant for biblical studies as well.

First, it serves as a healthy reminder of the principle that terminology (or form) is not necessarily co-terminal with genre. While the presence or absence of key terms should not be discounted, the presence in this case of such wisdom *concepts* and *themes* as creation, order, the fear of the Lord, moral responsibility, and the life/death dichotomy must be given appropriate weight in determining genre. Second, the author's reflection on the nature of biblical wisdom provides a welcome realignment of what wisdom encompasses. Wisdom is not, as some surmise, a kind of tame and inclusive secular knowledge framed within the broader Israelite intellectual tradition. It is ultimately rooted in the divine: "This knowledge based on human observation and encounter is not simply secular, in the manner in which we define it in the modern world, but rather is integrally related to experience with the divine" (6). Third, Kampen points out that real texts tend to resist overly narrow literary categorizations; texts will rarely fit tightly sealed literary silos. The DDS sapiential texts are, in some cases, clearly "characterized by the integration of eschatological and apocalyptic perspectives" (13-14). That ancient texts often have fuzzy boundaries relative to genre should caution anyone tempted to force biblical texts into one literary category or another.

For each wisdom composition, Kampen provides a general introduction that includes a summary of contents, a careful analysis of the manuscripts, an exploration of their historical context, an examination of a variety of literary questions, and a focused bibliography. This is followed by an original translation and an in-depth commentary.

In the chapter on the *Instruction*, Kampen includes a section in which he examines in greater detail a number of key terms that are particularly important for understanding the use of the wisdom motif in this composition. Expressions receiving special attention are "mystery of existence," "inner desire," "man of discernment," "wisdom," "poverty," "intention," and "walk." The author also provides a shorter such section in the chapter dealing with the *Beatitudes*, in which "man of discernment," "together," and "walk together" are examined. *Wisdom Literature* also includes an Index of Modern Authors and an Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Texts.

Not surprisingly, Kampen's *Wisdom Literature* will have important implications for New Testament studies. Besides providing a broader

background against which to interpret the wisdom motif in the NT, his study offers information that, for instance, could eventually shed new light on such concepts as the identification of Jesus as the wisdom of God or the sharp contrast between flesh and spirit attested in Paul's writings (28-34).

Kampen's *Wisdom Literature* makes a valuable contribution to the study of the DSS, and deserves careful consideration by all those, specialists or not, who wish to gain new insights into this important body of Jewish literature.

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Paul Martens. *The Heterodox Yoder*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.

Paul Martens concludes *The Heterodox Yoder* by asserting that the object of his study was indeed "heterodox" (144). Martens has his work cut out for him as he seeks to substantiate such a surprising judgment. What is the "orthodoxy" against which Yoder's theology is to be measured? As the author admits, labeling something as "heterodox" as opposed to "orthodox" begs for the definition of orthodoxy. Indeed. But he expresses reluctance to get his "toes wet in this debate." He ends up with a simple definition: "My criterion is the Christian affirmation of the particularity or uniqueness of Jesus Christ as a historical person and as a revelation of God" (2). This definition does not apply to Yoder?

Martens begs his readers' patience: "Read my argument through to the end before rendering judgment" (2). He implies a promise here: Stay with me and I will carefully and clearly explain why I am making this charge that may seem absurd to you. It is on the fulfillment of this promise that *The Heterodox Yoder* should be judged.

The heart of the book, chapters two through five, offers a roughly chronological survey of Yoder's theological evolution. These chapters provide a valuable account of Yoder's development that begins in the early 1950s and concludes with the projects he engaged towards the end of his life in 1997.

Martens makes a distinctive contribution to our sense of the evolution of Yoder's theology. However, the analysis of Yoder's work specifically in relation to the book's central question (Was Yoder orthodox?) is surprisingly muted. In these chapters the author hardly addresses the orthodoxy question.

In the end, Martens fails to make the case that Yoder was heterodox. However, what undermines the book is not this failure. A *careful* argument that Yoder was heterodox could still be instructive, even if finally unpersuasive. The problem with *The Heterodox Yoder* is that the author does not provide bases for a constructive conversation. In the end, there are three important elements of such a conversation that he does not engage. First, although he gives a definition of "orthodoxy" presumably to govern his analysis of Yoder's thought, he is vague about what he means by the term. And he does not return to his criterion of orthodox christology as an on-going, stable basis for evaluation as he goes through Yoder's thought. He does not even return to his criterion of orthodoxy in the conclusion as he asserts Yoder's heterodoxy.

A second major lack is the author's failure to engage Yoder on the level of biblical interpretation. His critique seems to be that Yoder reduces theology to (neo-Kantian) ethics, that Yoder in the end is a modernist. The big problem here is that Yoder always presented his thought as being biblically based; his notions of ethics and politics were not intended to echo modernist views but to be distinctively biblical. If one is going to critique Yoder as Martens does, one cannot ignore Yoder's interpretations of the Bible. One would have to *show* where Yoder goes wrong. To say he is heterodox because he over-emphasizes politics and ethics is unfair, unless one is willing to show that Yoder departs from biblical teaching. Linked with this failure is that Martens does not engage Yoder's privileging the Bible over the later creeds that Yoder also nonetheless affirms. Martens implies that his criterion of orthodoxy rests on creedal definitions of the identity of Jesus Christ. Perhaps Yoder's definition of the identity of Christ is different. If so, it is because Yoder places the priority on the biblical portrayal of Jesus. This is a crucial issue, largely ignored by Martens.

Finally, the third theme required for a useful conversation that doesn't happen is a sense of Martens's own constructive concerns. The book reads like an effort at debunking rather than as part of a bigger project in constructive

theology. The author's silence about his own positive vision makes it difficult to converse with his critique. How does Martens think we should affirm Jesus Christ's humanity and divinity in ways that speak to the lives we are living in this world? A sense of his viewpoint would provide a much-needed perspective on his critique.

Yoder's theology remains an invitation for conversation. We should be happy that Martens has joined this conversation – and hope for a more substantive contribution in the future, should he seek to sustain his critique of Yoder's orthodoxy.

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