



# ***The Conrad Grebel Review***

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Mattheus Mair's Steadfastness

# ***The Conrad Grebel Review***

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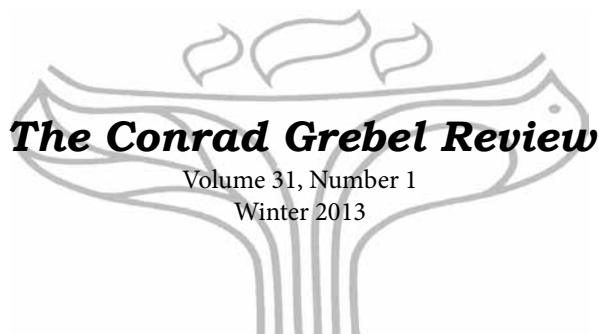
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## Foreword

We inaugurate CGR's thirtieth anniversary year with an issue offering at least one "first" in the journal's history as well as traditional elements. The more obvious first is the public lecture by the Rodney and Lorna Sawatsky Visiting Scholar. This lecture makes its initial appearance in this issue of CGR, as poet and educator Julia Spicher Kasdorf explores that classic of Mennonite cultural memory, *Martyrs Mirror*. The other first—so far as we can determine from surveying past issues—is a "review article" by David Driedger, a personal essay engaging at length with a recently published book, something more extensive than a standard brief review.

We are equally pleased to honor one of CGR's longstanding traditions by presenting the 2012 Bechtel Lectures, "Blest Be the Ties That Bind: In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church," by John D. Roth, historian and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. These annual lectures have appeared in the journal since their inception at Conrad Grebel University College.

Rounding out this issue are reviews of a wide range of recent publications. We thank our book reviewers and our peer-reviewers for their invaluable assistance. We also extend a welcome to CGR's new consulting editors, and we thank those who have now completed their term of service.

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The Spring 2013 issue will uphold another of CGR's traditions, that of presenting essays and reflections on "Mennonite/s Writing." This special issue, assembled by Hildi Froese Tiessen, CGR's former Literary Editor, will give voice to an array of scholars and practitioners, and will include a discussion of "theopoetics."

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As CGR enters its fourth decade, we seek to extend and enhance the journal's reputation as a forum for the sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective.

*Jeremy M. Bergen*  
Editor

*Stephen A. Jones*  
Managing Editor

2012 BECHTEL LECTURES

**“Blest Be the Ties That Bind”:  
In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church**

LECTURE ONE

**The Challenge of Church Unity in the Anabaptist Tradition**

*John D. Roth*

**Introduction**

On January 26, 1531, veteran Swiss Brethren missionary Wilhelm Reublin addressed a long letter to his friend and co-worker Pilgram Marpeck. “You should know,” Reublin wrote regarding the community at Austerlitz, Moravia he had recently visited, “that I have been badly deceived in regards to the Brotherhood.” To his dismay, Reublin had discovered that the elders there were “false deceivers, untrue in doctrine, life and work in each and every point.” Marpeck agreed. After several failed attempts to heal the growing rift, he gave up in frustration, angrily claiming that he would “rather unite with the Turks and the Pope.”<sup>1</sup>

Although scholars today are accustomed to thinking of the Hutterites and the Swiss Brethren as two distinct traditions within the Anabaptist family, nothing at the time suggested that the division between these two groups was inevitable. After all, both shared theological roots going back to Zurich and the Grebel circle; the first Church Discipline of the Hutterites was based explicitly on the earliest Swiss congregational order; and the Hutterian emphasis on community of goods was clearly an extension—not a rejection—of the Swiss Anabaptist commitment to radical mutual aid.

Nevertheless, within a few short years an identity of opposition had crystallized in both groups. In 1543, for example, Hans Klöpfer of Feuerbach reported that he left the Swiss Brethren because they had abandoned true Christian community, paid war taxes, and had a confused leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. C. Wenger, trans. and ed., “A Letter from Wilhelm Reublin to Pilgram Marpeck, 1531,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* Vol. 23, no. 2 (April 1949): 67-75.

structure.<sup>2</sup> Several years later, a group of Swiss Brethren in Bad Kreuznach defended their conversion to the Hutterites, saying that the Swiss Brethren “did not teach the truth regarding original sin” and “did not keep themselves separated clearly enough from other groups.”<sup>3</sup>

The Swiss, of course, did not take these defections casually. Shortly before his death as a martyr in 1565, Matthias Servaes denounced the Hutterites: “God keep me from them and the doings of their teachers,” he wrote in a letter preserved in the *Martyrs Mirror*.<sup>4</sup> And six years later, at the Frankenthal Disputation, the Swiss Brethren insisted that they had nothing to do with the Hutterites or their teachings on community of goods.

Yet the controversy between the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites was only one of many church divisions within the Anabaptist movement during the course of the 16th century. The rapid growth of Anabaptism during the 1520s and 1530s, combined with the pressures of persecution and a congregationally-oriented ecclesiology, ensured that group boundaries would be sharply contested throughout the century. “[The Anabaptists] have divided themselves over so many different things,” wrote the German spiritualist Sebastian Franck in his *Chronica* of 1531, “that they now have almost as many teachings as they have leaders.”<sup>5</sup> The same year, Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, denounced the Anabaptists in similar language. “[They] are divided into numerous sects,” he wrote, “and each bans and denounces the other as if they were the devil.”<sup>6</sup> Although Franck and Bullinger were undoubtedly exaggerating, their description of the Anabaptist movement as a confusing welter of competing groups was not entirely a figment of the polemicist’s imagination. By 1722, the Reformed theologian Johann Jacob Wolleb, in his *Gespräch zwischen einem Pietisten und einem Wiedertäufer*, laboriously catalogued no less than 70 sectarian groups, each bearing some relationship, he claimed, to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 1:226.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>4</sup> T. J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...*, trans. Joseph Sohm, 12th ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 696.

<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Franck, *Chronica, Zeitbuch vund Gehichsbibell* (Ulm, 1536), 193b.

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *Von dem unverschampten fräfel* (Zurich, 1531), 1: viii.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Jacob Wolleb, *Gespräch zwischen einem Pietisten und einem Wiedertäufer* (Basel, 1722).



Though modern scholars do not always agree on the exact taxonomy, the reality of fragmentation in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has persisted to the present. Today, there are at least a dozen major conferences under the Anabaptist umbrella in the United States, and perhaps as many as 16 in Canada. Closer inspection reveals no fewer than 11 Amish groups, 10 Brethren groups, 4 Hutterite groups, 53 Mennonite groups, some 79 regional districts and at least 247 smaller independent congregations or alliances, for a total of some 404 discrete bodies in the US.<sup>8</sup>

At the micro level, the story gets even more complicated. Margaret Loewen Reimer and Marlene Epp, for example, suggest that there may be as many as 27 different groups of Mennonites in Ontario alone.<sup>9</sup> Cory Anderson's recent study of Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonite groups reveals an astounding proliferation of alliances, fellowships, brotherhoods, and independent congregations that defies all effort at categorization.<sup>10</sup> And LeRoy Beachy's history of Old Order and Mennonite groups in Holmes County, Ohio enumerates more than 30 non-communing Anabaptist-related groups in that settlement alone—making it a veritable gamepark of rare and exotic species that results from what Freud called “the narcissism of minor differences.”<sup>11</sup>

Each of these groups, of course, has a particular story to tell about its origin—often a narrative that begins with an account of the doctrinal or ethical apostasy of the community with which it had once associated, and the clarity of biblical vision that gave birth to its own purer, truer, more faithful understanding of the gospel. Initially, the pain associated with each new division—the anguish over the loss of fellowship with friends and family, or the frustration at the inability of the other party to recognize the truth—is palpable for all involved. But soon enough, new friendships are forged, new traditions take root, new institutions are built, and a new identities emerge that make the division seem inevitable, if not divinely ordained—simply part

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from Donald B. Kraybill and C. Nelson Hostetter, *Anabaptist World USA* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Margaret L. Reimer, *One Quilt, Many Pieces: A Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Cory Anderson, “Retracing the Blurred Boundaries of Twentieth-Century ‘Amish-Mennonite’ Identity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 3 (July 2011): 361-412.

<sup>11</sup> Leroy Beachy, *Unser Leit: The Story of the Amish* (Millersburg, OH: the author, 2011), 2: xx.

of the new landscape within which we live and work.

In 2010 two large groups in North America celebrated anniversaries—150 years since the founding of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860, and 100 years since the beginning of the Conservative Mennonite Conference. Both groups marked the occasion with celebratory gatherings that recalled the vision of the founders, stories of early faith heroes, and narratives of great accomplishments amid sacrifice and adversity. Yet hidden in these same celebrations is the painful reality that all these groups were born in the cauldron of schism—that what we are marking in these anniversaries is a division within the body of Christ.

What are we to make of the divided and fractured nature of the church, not just the 34,000-some denominations within the larger Body of Christ but all the schisms and divisions that have rent the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship of believers?

This essay—the first of two Bechtel Lectures—will focus primarily on the Mennonite church in North America, tracing the roots of a persistent motif of church division within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, and setting forth an argument that ecumenical conversations should begin with those groups who are closest in theology and history. But the larger context of these reflections concerns the remarkable growth of the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship outside North America. Currently, Mennonite World Conference (MWC) recognizes some 227 Anabaptist-Mennonite groups or conferences in some 80 countries numbering close to 1.7 million baptized members. So, behind the question of church division in the local context is a deeper question: what does it mean to be part of this “*global* fellowship”? What does “church unity” mean in a global context? In what sense are local Mennonite congregations in the United States and Canada connected to individuals or groups bearing the Mennonite name in Indonesia, Ecuador, Ghana, or the Netherlands?

Although this essay will argue that the internal divisions within the Anabaptist-Mennonite church are a profound theological and spiritual problem, it is also important to acknowledge from the outset the many expressions of fraternal good will that obviously exist within the Anabaptist family. For nearly a century, a wide range of groups have shared their resources in support of Mennonite Central Committee, enabling numerous

Anabaptist-Mennonite conferences to cooperate in a ministry of relief and service. Additionally, other organizations like Mennonite Disaster Service, Civilian Public Service, PAX, or 1-W Service have also played important roles in promoting a sense of shared identity. During the second half of the 20th century, representatives from the Mennonite church, the Church of the Brethren, and the Brethren in Christ have hosted a series of “Believers Church” conferences to promote conversation about common theological, ethical, and ecclesial questions. On a larger scale, MWC has played a significant role in strengthening connections among many Anabaptist groups. And many other forms of cooperation and mutual respect could be identified within the larger Anabaptist-Mennonite family. Clearly our differences have not resulted in complete alienation among the wide range of groups.

Furthermore, Mennonite church leaders and laypeople have recently expressed a new openness to ecumenical dialogue that has resulted in a flurry of encounters with other Christian traditions. For centuries, Mennonite collective identity was frequently anchored in a defensive posture vis-à-vis the larger Christian church in which Mennonites described themselves in oppositional terms as being “neither Catholic nor Protestant” or “nonconformed to the world.”<sup>12</sup> In Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA this seems to be changing. In the past 10 years alone, Mennonites have engaged in bilateral conversations with the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Lutheran World Federation, the Pentecostal Church, and the Seventh Day Adventists; and now, most recently, in a trilateral conversation on baptism with the Catholics and Lutherans. At the same time, energetic lay initiatives among Mennonites and Catholics have led to the formation of Bridgefolk and prompted a series of gatherings between the Reformed churches of the Cantons of Zurich and Bern and several Mennonite groups in Switzerland and eastern Pennsylvania.<sup>13</sup> And signs of more intentional conversation with

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<sup>12</sup> Although Walter Klaassen has since sought to qualify his position, his widely-read *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1981; rept. 2001) is a good illustration of this oppositional stance as a basis for a distinctive identity.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of these conversations and links to many of the texts associated with them, see the website “Right Remembering: Anabaptist-Mennonites in Conversation with Other Christians” at [www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Ecumenical\\_Dialogue](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Ecumenical_Dialogue) (accessed July 19, 2012).

partners in the Emergent Church or “new Anabaptist” communities are equally promising.

All these interdenominational initiatives are praiseworthy and should continue. They have garnered a fair amount of attention in the church press, strengthened the Mennonite profile in the broader Christian community, and in some circles, at least, they have generated a new sense of ecclesial confidence and self-esteem. In the noisy marketplace of competing Christian traditions, Mennonites have something distinctive to offer for which there may actually be some demand.

Still, in all honesty, the recent flurry of interdenominational encounters has not forced Mennonites to engage questions of identity, conviction, or practice very deeply. Indeed, to the extent that ecumenical conversations tend to highlight and reinforce an identity rooted in distinctives, these exchanges with Catholics, Lutherans, and Pentecostals may actually tempt Mennonites to cultivate a false sense of identity. If Mennonites are genuinely interested in ecumenical dialogue—if they think that these recent ecumenical engagements are a good thing—then they should start the path toward healing by addressing the sins of brokenness closest to home, that is, the divisions within the Anabaptist family.

Such a task will not be easy. Indeed, it may well take several generations before it actually bears fruit. Yet healing the self-inflicted wounds within the Anabaptist family may ultimately lead Mennonites into a form of renewal that is even deeper, more transformative, and more life-giving than the current encounters with groups who do not have a particular claim on shared memories or a collective theological identity.

The argument that follows will unfold in three steps: first, a perspective on why groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have had a propensity to divide; second, a claim that the divided nature of the Mennonite fellowship must be regarded as a problem; and finally, an invitation to elevate the internal divisions within the Mennonite family as a higher priority for future ecumenical conversations.

### **Historical Context of Divisions within Anabaptism**

Mennonites are frequently inclined to assert—in an almost righteously self-critical way—that “we just don’t know how to handle conflict,” or that

“we are a uniquely fractious group.” Strictly speaking, the Baptists and the Mormons have probably been even more fractious than the Anabaptists. But the larger concern merits more consideration: why does it seem that Anabaptist-Mennonite groups have been so prone to divide rather than to frame their conflicts in terms that would permit a greater degree of diversity within the body? The answers can be found in history.

Like all children of the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement was itself born in division. Inspired by Luther’s challenge to papal hierarchy and the explosive argument of *sola scriptura*, the early Anabaptists—like all the reformers—came into being by rejecting traditional forms of authority. But once the initial break with the church was formalized in the baptisms of January 21, 1525, they—like all the reformers—immediately faced a dilemma of their own creation: having broken free from the authority of Rome, how does one then resist the impulse to further schism and re-legitimate principles of authority and standards of church unity within one’s own circle? The inability of Protestants to resolve this question is largely responsible for the estimated 15,000 different denominations in North America today; and it has been a part of the ongoing struggle for identity within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as well.

The challenge of church unity was compounded for Anabaptists, since they generally rejected strategies for church unity that other Protestant groups developed in attempting to put the lid back on the Pandora’s box of ecclesial authority. By 1530, for instance, the Lutherans had agreed on the Augsburg Confession (and later, the Formula of Concord), which continues to serve as the theological foundation of Lutheran identity today. The Church of England retained the hierarchical authority of the episcopacy, grounded in a theory of Apostolic Succession. Calvin’s *Institutes* became the anchor of a rigorously systematic approach to theology that has kept Reformed groups in conversation with each other through the centuries. And when push came to shove, all these children of the Reformation were willing to fall back on the authority of the state to enforce orthodoxy by means of the coercive power of the sword if necessary. None of these “solutions” appealed to Anabaptist groups, for theologically sound reasons. But the result was a more complex, less linear, understanding of church unity.

Several distinctive theological convictions have further complicated Anabaptist commitments to Christian unity. Through the centuries, most

Anabaptist groups have insisted that the inner, personal experience of God's grace must be made visible in daily life. Ethical behavior, Mennonites have often argued—how one lives, what one does, what one says—is not in tension with grace. Rather, it is a necessary expression of grace. Moreover, Christians in the Anabaptist tradition are called not merely to be good people (law abiding-citizens, for example) but to be *transformed* people—part of a “new creation” in Christ who walk in the power of the resurrected Lord. And the standard for Christian discipleship is very high—nothing less than the life of Jesus himself! Finally, when Mennonites talk about the “church,” they traditionally have not meant a spiritualized abstraction but a concrete, visible gathering of people, united in their witness and accountable to each other for their actions. When Mennonites have conflicts, they are not at liberty to shrug their shoulders and declare that “what you do is none of my business”—tempting though that response may be.

The Anabaptists understood all these convictions—a faith made visible in deed, modeled after the high calling of Jesus, and evident in the shared practices of the church—to be consistent with scripture and the witness of the apostolic church. But these same convictions have also been a source of persistent conflict in their tradition. After all, people of good will are inclined to interpret the Gospel—and the ethical practices that follow from it—in different ways. The cultural context is constantly changing; and the church is always a clay vessel made up of imperfect people.

At its best, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has struggled mightily with an ongoing paradox: precisely because the church is a visible witness to the world, Mennonites have insisted on the importance of holy living and unity within the body—hence the emphasis on the disciplined community. Yet the very depth of this commitment to Christ's pastoral prayer in John 17 for the visible unity of the church has led to a tangled history of conflicts and church divisions over the specific nature of that witness. In the reaction against concepts of church unity that are spiritualized, reduced to formal theological constructs, or coercively imposed, Mennonites have tended to maintain the unity (or “purity”) of the church by dividing.

At its worst, however, the propensity of groups to divide is an expression of human sin that makes an idol out of the particular enculturated form that has been given to the body of Christ. If the Anabaptist-Mennonites' gift to

the broader Christian tradition has been an emphasis on “the Word made flesh,” their sin has been a stubborn tendency to reify particular incarnations of the faith, so that they easily end up worshipping themselves—the church they have created—rather than the Creator. Like Cain, Mennonites bring their gifts to the altar; but instead of focusing on worship and the abundance of God’s blessing, they anxiously compare their gifts with others’ and assert an identity of difference—the unique superiority of their own gift.

Such an identity, rooted in human pride and heavenward towers of our own creation, is inherently unstable. An identity rooted in difference and separation will never exhaust itself, since the enemy of “Otherness” will always rear its ugly face within the group. The story is sometimes told of two Mennonites who survived a shipwreck on an isolated island in the middle of the ocean. When at last they were discovered, it turned out that they had built three churches. Asked why, they answered, “One attends the first church; the other attends the second church.” Why, then, the third church? “That’s the church that neither of us attends.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Why is This a Problem?**

There are some, perhaps many, for whom all this history of divisiveness is not a problem. Some Mennonites are quick to insist that their differences are only external eccentricities that have no bearing on salvation; ultimately, all groups are merely branches from the same tree. Religious pluralism is a healthy sign of toleration—as long as people are no longer killing each other over religious matters, let them believe whatever they want. Others have come to view schism as a path to church growth, since churches multiply by dividing. Still others, drawing perhaps on the analogy of divorce, might acknowledge that it is not good to divide, but there are times when division is preferable to the alternative of constant bickering and arguing.

There may be some element of wisdom in these approaches. From

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<sup>14</sup> This impulse, of course, is not unique to Anabaptists. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is perhaps the most ecumenically-oriented denomination in America today. The call to heal the body of Christ is central to their very identity, and they are exemplary in their hospitality to other traditions. But relations with their first cousins, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, are generally much more divisive and emotionally-charged than with virtually any other group.

a larger perspective, however, none of them seems logically coherent or theologically satisfying.

### *1. Ecumenical Conversations*

First, our internal divisions make it difficult to know how to engage in conversation with other Christian groups with integrity. Recent overtures for ecumenical dialogue with Catholics and other mainline Protestant groups are certainly to be welcomed. But the fragmented nature of Mennonite church polity makes it almost impossible to determine who in these conversations is actually qualified to speak on behalf of Mennonites or “the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.” When the ELCA wanted to talk about condemnations of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession, they came to MC USA, but it would have been just as logical for them to approach the Conservative Mennonite Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, the Old Order Amish, or the Church of God in Christ Mennonites. As a participant in those conversations I was delighted to be included, but it was never quite clear to representatives on the Mennonite side on whose behalf we were speaking. That unclarity became even more awkward when the ELCA expressed a desire to extend a formal apology. Among many Mennonite-related groups, which one is qualified to receive such a gesture?

### *2. The Global Church*

The confusing nature of Anabaptist ecclesiology is also problematic when attention shifts to the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship. The recent phenomenal growth of the Anabaptist church in the Global South reflects a dramatic movement of the Spirit. Traditional cultural and ethical boundary markers that have been the source of so much wrangling among Anabaptist groups in North America often make very little sense in these new cultural settings. What exactly binds these groups together, however, is not at all clear. Mennonite World Conference is one attempt at ecclesial coherence—yet the structure of MWC is actually quite loose. What does membership in MWC actually mean? What are the minimal standards of doctrine or ethics that the group would need to uphold?<sup>15</sup> What difference does it make to a

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<sup>15</sup> To be sure, MWC has made an effort to give the communion a sharper confessional profile. See, for example, the “Statement of Shared Convictions,” adopted by the MWC General



congregation in North America if a new group emerges in Kenya that seeks affiliation with MWC? These are questions that beg for answers.

### *3. Theological/Missiological Concerns*

Perhaps the strongest reason Mennonites should not be resigned to a divided church is theological. Simply put, church unity is a gospel imperative. In the familiar passage from John 17, Jesus prayed “that all of [his followers] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). He went on to suggest that it is precisely the unity of his followers that makes plausible the claim that he is one with the Father. The very credibility of the church’s identity in the world is at stake here: the church should be united “so that the world may believe that you have sent me!” The apostle Paul made a similar claim when he insisted that the message of the Gospel from all eternity is God’s desire to make one humanity out of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14; 4:1-3). John Howard Yoder puts it in language much stronger than I ever heard in growing up in Holmes County, Ohio, where 30 different non-communing Anabaptist-Mennonite groups live side-by-side: “The unity of two kinds of people,” writes Yoder, “those born within the law and those without, is what God was about from all history. Where Christians are not united, the gospel is not true in that place.”<sup>16</sup>

If the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition does not have the reconciliation of non-communing groups as one of its primary concerns, then it has very little credibility for its claim that the world should heed its wisdom regarding the gospel of peace.

### **Why Ecumenical Conversations Should Start at Home, and Why They Will Take a Long Time**

Thus far, I have described why groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have struggled with the challenge of fragmentation, and why these internal divisions are problematic. If my argument has been convincing,

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Council in 2006 and an explication of this statement by Alfred Neufeld in *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007). But the statement is quite general.

<sup>16</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The Imperative of Christian Unity,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 291.

then I think ecumenically-minded Mennonites in the future must include conversations with other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups as a significant priority. Here I offer three considerations.

First, intentional conversations with theological cousins—that is, with other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups—will encourage each group to tell its story as *confession* rather than as justification. Narratives of group formation and history have enormous power to shape collective identity. The stories groups tell about themselves—especially origin stories—profoundly shape their priorities, habits, and practices. Yet, as we learn from Scripture itself, telling one's story confessionally is an extraordinarily difficult task. Most groups narrate their history, quite unselfconsciously, as a form of self-justification—as if the story of God's mighty acts in history was pointing from the beginning to the emergence of their group. Since every distinct Christian group emerged in the cauldron of conflict, our first impulse is to tell stories that highlight the integrity, courage, and orthodoxy of our side in the controversy in order to justify the existence of a new group.

This tendency is especially true in ecumenical conversations, where etiquette demands that all the major traditions honor the origin stories of the other. Though we may make certain cultural gestures toward humility, the story we are most likely to tell in formal ecumenical contexts is a heroic one. In our standard account, the 16th-century Anabaptists were sober-minded, earnest Christians who shared Luther's passion for scripture but had the courage actually to live out the principles of *sola scriptura*. Unlike other groups, who found creative ways to dodge the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, they “took Jesus seriously”—they actually put into practice what he taught. In contrast to Luther and the other reformers, who were quick to run for cover behind the sword of the princes when they met with opposition, the Anabaptists put their trust in God alone. Indeed, if any doubts persist about their credentials, Mennonites are quick to remind conversation partners that the Anabaptists suffered and died for their convictions, and that it was the ancestors of contemporary Protestants and Catholics who were doing the killing.

To be sure, this same temptation is present when Mennonites describe their origins vis-à-vis those of other Anabaptist groups. When talking in

their own circles, each Mennonite group tends to think of itself as the true bearer of the faithful tradition. Other groups—driven by irrational temper tantrums or petty personality conflicts—were the ones who “chose” to leave. If the wayward child wishes to come back to the table, our group would be glad to offer the hand of fellowship and reintegrate them into the flow of God’s history.

Yet in conversations with groups closest to us, we cannot get by with such simplistic renditions of the past. Not only do our first cousins share a heroic claim to the same 16th-century origins, they also are fully aware of the warts, blemishes, and shortcomings in the larger Mennonite tradition that are usually kept hidden in the shorthand historical summaries offered in ecumenical dialogues with Lutherans or Catholics. Indeed, genuine face-to-face conversations about divisions within the family can unfold only in a confessional posture of mutual humility and vulnerability.

This is not easy. Consider, for example, the decade-long process that led to the integration of General Conference Mennonite and (Old) Mennonite church conferences. The official narrative of the Mennonite Church USA origin story, of course, is about church unity; but the integration process also had the unintended consequence of nationalizing two church bodies, and, in the US, it prompted the departure of nearly 200 congregations and some 12,000-15,000 people. In public versions of that story we are inclined to regard these outcomes as inevitable and necessary: it was the unavoidable collateral damage of progress; or, we needed to recalibrate the center; or, the groups who departed are happier on their own (by which we really mean: thank goodness we don’t need to deal with them anymore!).

Yet the sobering question still remains. Just how much lamenting or confessing has been done to acknowledge that efforts at promoting unity also fostered further divisions? What would it mean to invite several of those groups to help tell the story of MC USA or MC Canada beginnings in a *confessional* mode? Could Mennonites in either country entertain the possibility of a version of that story in which they, not the other group, were the ones who left the table? What would it look like to restore family ties, not as parents welcoming wayward children back home, but as prodigals who seek forgiveness for acting in ways that injured each other and the honor of the family?

On the surface, these questions may sound irrelevant and the suggestions highly impractical. Indeed, a confessional approach to the story of group origins goes against every impulse of institutional logic oriented to self-preservation and the responsible cultivation of a positive public image. Yet the biblical story is full of examples of history as confession, both in the sense of confessing failures and in the more positive sense of confessing our faith in the Creator of the universe. Telling our origin stories as a form of confession reminds us that true Christian identity is not about David's Kingdom, Solomon's Temple, the Council of Niceae, or the Schleithem Confession—important as these events may be. Rather, identity is ultimately about “telos,” the end for which we were created, which is to worship God: to confess through our words and deeds the Lordship of Christ over the cosmos.

Unity of the body of Christ begins with gestures that imitate Christ's vulnerable and self-emptying nature—not in a pathological sense of abandoning a distinctive identity. Indeed, the Incarnation reminds us that the enemy here is never the particularity of embodied forms. But origin stories told confessionally recognize that God's presence always exceeds our grasp; that something larger than a particular faith community is unfolding in history; that the blessing of God is plentiful rather than scarce; and that identity always begins and ends in the “letting go” of worship rather than in the grasping of self-justification. And with the passage of time and with careful listening, Mennonites may be forced to recognize with new appreciation that Anabaptist-Mennonite theological convictions can find authentic expression in a wider constellation of cultural settings than previously imagined.

Just as urgent as the ongoing conversations with Lutherans or Catholics or Pentecostals is the need to ask questions and to listen attentively to our closest cousins: How have you given expression to Anabaptist convictions in your life and practice? What distinctive gifts are you seeking to embody in your worship and practice? What makes you excited about identifying with this corner of God's Kingdom? What are the biggest challenges facing your understanding of Christian faithfulness?

In contrast to the narratives we tell in other ecumenical dialogues, conversations with those closest can happen only in a posture of confession.

Second, let me suggest that conversations with faith cousins provide an opportunity for vulnerable hospitality. Hospitality in the Christian tradition names the practice of participating with Christ in a posture of openness and embrace toward the Other—even, or perhaps especially, when the Other appears in the form of our enemy.

Hospitality, of course, is a common, almost trendy, theme in ecumenical dialogues. Yet it is often much easier for Mennonites to offer hospitality to strangers whom we scarcely know and with whom we have little in common than to extend it to those much closer to us who have refused our counsel and are not all that interesting. There is nothing wrong with the first sort of hospitality, the sort that Mennonites are likely to extend to Catholics, Lutherans, and maybe even Muslims. This is the hospitality of “niceness”: much like a conversation with an interesting person next to you on a long airplane ride in which you end by exchanging e-mail addresses and promise to look each other up next time you are in town. In such relationships, we are basically in full control from the beginning, with an implicit mutual understanding from the start that the relationship is probably not going to demand too much and certainly not put one’s identity at risk.

Vulnerable hospitality goes beyond this. For a mental picture of the difference between hospitality and “vulnerable” hospitality, consider how much easier it would be for progressive-minded Mennonites to wash feet with a Lutheran in a reconciliation service, or to send a Christian delegation to Iran, or to challenge their church to be more understanding of Ahmadinejad’s anti-semitism than it would be to extend that same graciousness to all those right-wing Mennonites down the street who listen to Rush Limbaugh, support Zionist causes, and cheered the killing of Osama bin Laden. Vulnerable hospitality begins by asking: who are the groups that irritate me the most? Who is most urgently in need of my wisdom? Which Anabaptist-Mennonite groups make me cringe when strangers assume I belong to them? It may be precisely these groups who have the most to teach us about the Christian practice of hospitality.

This distinction has practical consequences for ecumenical dialogue. According to the practices of hospitality, conventional ecumenical conversations almost always begin with an implicit acknowledgement of a doctrinal “division of labor.” Thus, Mennonites know ahead of time that

conversations with Lutherans mean the Lutherans will bring the doctrine of grace to the table; the Catholics, Mennonites assume, can teach them something about liturgy and a sacramental understanding of worship; Mennonites speak to the Pentecostals because they want to figure out how to become more missional and more attuned to the active presence of the Holy Spirit. And so it goes. In this sort of ecumenical map drawing, Mennonites are almost always invited to talk about service and peacemaking. They are the free church experts who have maintained a witness to the gospel of peace for nearly five centuries, so this is what they bring to the table.

At least two problems result from this sort of hospitality. The first is how it tends to truncate Mennonite understandings of Christian theology: we spend so much energy explicating our key distinctives that we lose sight of the larger theological framework that sustains and nourishes these convictions. The second is that it tends to reinforce a sort of ecclesial pride: Mennonites have a seat at the table because they have something that others are lacking. In a perversion of true hospitality, they are tempted to come to the conversation in the sure knowledge of their contribution, and with a vested interest in defending the uniqueness of that difference since this is what made them interesting conversation partners in the first place.

A vulnerable hospitality extended to theological first cousins—especially to those who embarrass us or make us uncomfortable—could push Mennonites to reflect more carefully on some of the blind spots in their shared theological identity. By helping all participating groups to avoid the temptation of comfortable claims about their uniqueness, such encounters could open the door to more authentic self-awareness and deeper renewal. There are no guarantees in this, of course.

Finally, conversations with theological cousins can be an occasion to practice the discipline of “radical patience.” Part of the appeal of conversations with Catholics, Lutherans, and Pentecostals is that Mennonites enter such encounters with a fairly focused agenda, and with assurances to skeptics that it is not about Mennonites “becoming” Catholics or Lutherans. To be sure, participants may entertain some distant eschatological vision of a church united in Christ, but the horizons of church unity are so remote or so improbable that they are not forced to struggle too hard with fundamental

questions of identity.

Conversations with groups closer in belief to Mennonites, however, would challenge participants to practice a more radical form of patience and hope: that is, the patience of a pilgrim who has set out intentionally on a journey with the hope of arriving at a destination in this lifetime, but recognizing that the path is long, the journey difficult, and there is much to be learned along the way. This is the sort of radical patience required of a separated couple in a Recovery of Hope program. Both parties recognize a shared history: there once was something precious held in common, a time when the distinctive identities appeared to be mutually enriching and complementary rather than incompatible. Yet it is also clear that habits, tastes, and practices have been shaped by a lengthy period of separation. Thus, the path to a restored relationship is going to be arduous; but the possibility exists that a reunion of some sort could really result from the encounter.

This may be the most difficult part of ecumenism, but also the most authentically Anabaptist. Because the unity being sought is anchored ultimately in real congregations and the embodied, concrete practices of worship and discipleship, the journey of reconciliation is likely to be a haphazard, nonlinear, unpredictable process that will likely take a very long time—much longer than most people in positions of leadership are willing to countenance.

Radical patience will resist declaring consensus in the form of documents and organizational flowcharts without being attentive to the long slow work of the Spirit in the health of relationships. Radical patience calls us to take a first, vulnerable step in the other's direction, even without defining the outcome in advance and in the knowledge that the actions taken now may not bear fruit for several generations. In the end, it is God who transforms hearts, God who is working his purposes out in history, and God who will give the increase in God's own time.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

These reflections opened with an account of the early division between the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites. I conclude with another, far less familiar, story. During the course of the 18th and 19th century, many Amish

congregations immigrated to North America. But a significant number remained in Europe where, as in North America, they often lived alongside Mennonite congregations. In May 1867, representatives from Amish and Mennonite congregations in South Germany gathered at the small town of Offenthal with the goal of resolving differences that had separated the two groups for nearly a century and a half. Their meeting concluded with a statement on ten points of agreement, which those attending unanimously signed. Eventually, however, the effort to heal the division between the Amish and the Mennonites in Europe foundered on the question of mixed marriages—that is, marriages in the church to people who were not members of an Anabaptist group.<sup>17</sup>

Because this attempt at unity failed, almost nothing is known of this gathering. But it is a story that should be salvaged from the dustbin of history, especially since the Amish in North America were engaged in a series of conversations about identity at precisely the same time. That conversation, which unfolded in a long series of ministers' meetings (*Dienerversammlungen*), eventually resulted in the emergence of the Old Order Amish and the so-called Amish Mennonites, many of whom eventually joined MC USA. One could argue that the Christian church has been enriched by the witness of two distinct groups—Mennonites and Amish. But imagine how different Anabaptist-Mennonite history might have looked if the wounds opened by the Amish division in 1693 would have been healed in the 1860s. Today, the cultural and theological gap between Amish and Mennonites has become significantly wider than it was in 1867. But if steps toward the reunification of Amish and Mennonites seem almost unthinkable, then where are the Offenthal moments right now?

Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada find themselves today at a profoundly difficult moment in their history. The easiest indicators of the challenges ahead are those on the surface: rising age of the membership; weakening allegiance to institutions; declining budgets; and profound disagreements about organizational structure. But beneath these surface ripples are deeper currents of uncertainty: a growing

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. Risser, "Der 20. Und 21 Mai in Offenthal bei St. Goarshausen am Rhein," *Mennonitische Blätter* (June 1867), 38-40 and "Zum 8 unserer Offenthaler Vereinbarung," *Mennonitische Blätter* (May 1868), 28-31.



ambivalence about Anabaptist identity; divisions perpetuated by the culture wars; and confusion over the meaning and direction of a “missional” church. And, at an even deeper level—a level that we often can scarcely grasp—we struggle with the challenges of modern life: the impact of mass media; the siren songs of individualism; the fragmentation of meaning alongside the globalization of culture; the pervasive logic of production and consumption.

In the midst of these significant challenges, vulnerable conversations seeking reconciliation with estranged cousins in the Anabaptist-Mennonite world might seem like a luxury the church can scarcely afford. But it is also possible that such an initiative—pursued as a conscious exercise of confessional memory, vulnerable hospitality, and radical patience—could open us up to a deeper measure of God’s grace and point a direction for renewal and transformation.

2012 BECHTEL LECTURES

**“Blest Be the Ties That Bind”:  
In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church**

LECTURE TWO

**What Hath Zurich to do with Addis Ababa?  
Ecclesial Identity in the Global Anabaptist Church**

*John D. Roth*

On January 22, 2012, Rafael Erasmo Arevalo, a Mennonite pastor from Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras, was beaten and killed following an evening worship service he had led with a congregation in the nearby town of Veracruz.<sup>1</sup> The murder took place on World Fellowship Sunday, a day designated by Mennonite World Conference as an occasion for Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations around the world to remember that they are part of a global family of faith. The tragedy that unfolded that night, and the ensuing reports in the church papers, brought into focus not only the painful reality of senseless violence; it also raised a host of questions about the meaning of the “global church.”

The Anabaptist tradition has understood—rightly, I believe—that the most basic context of the Christian life is the local congregation. Here brothers and sisters in Christ gather for singing, Bible study, admonition, discussion, and prayer. Here they eat together, work together, and share in each other’s joys and sorrows. The Body of Christ, the tradition has taught, is not an abstraction but a living reality made visible in the face-to-face relationships of real people.

Around 4,500 people are murdered each year in Honduras. Clearly, Mennonites in North America do not grieve for each of them. So, why, given

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ron Rempel, “Honduran Pastor Murdered,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 6, 2012, 1. Online at: [www.mennoworld.org/2012/2/6/honduran-mennonite-pastor-murdered/](http://www.mennoworld.org/2012/2/6/honduran-mennonite-pastor-murdered/) (accessed July 17, 2012).

our local view of the church, should we take particular notice of Arevalo's death? Just how am I—or my congregation at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, Indiana—connected to the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña or to the congregations Arevalo served in Santa Rosa de Copán or Veracruz? Or, to frame the question in both a chronological and a geographical context: What hath Zurich to do with Addis Ababa? What hath Goshen or Waterloo to do with Santa Rosa de Copán?

The roughly 1.2 billion Catholics around the world recognize, at least in theory, that they are joined together through the spiritual authority of the pope, the teaching office of the church, and the sacrament of Holy Communion. The 68 million Lutherans are united by a common commitment to uphold the Augsburg Confession. The Anglican and Episcopalian bishops who represent their worldwide fellowship of 85 million members all claim an authority anchored in a doctrine of apostolic succession that links them all the way back to the apostle Peter who received that authority directly from Christ. To be sure, the ties holding these groups together are often contested; but they nonetheless provide a theological understanding of a shared global identity for which there is no clear parallel among Anabaptist-Mennonite groups. At some fundamental spiritual level Mennonites generally recognize that we are indeed “united in Christ” (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 2:13-16), or that we are “one in the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3-6). But at a more practical level, what are the bonds that connect the Mennonite congregations gathering for worship in Indonesia, Benin, Taiwan, Mexico, South Dakota, and Honduras? What does “World Fellowship Sunday” mean in a tradition with an impoverished theological vocabulary for describing the church beyond the local congregation?

In the first of these Bechtel Lectures, I argued that the tendency to division and schism has been a significant problem within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Although recent ecumenical engagements with Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Pentecostal groups suggest that Mennonites are becoming more sensitive to questions of unity within the Body of Christ, an even more pressing challenge for contemporary Mennonites in North America, I argued, would be a commitment to seek reconciliation with those groups closest to us—that is, groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that were the products of church division

within our own family. In this lecture, I want to explore another dimension of ecclesial unity within this tradition by focusing attention on the dramatic growth of the church outside Europe and North America. In light of the rapid expansion of Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in the Global South, new questions emerge regarding the ecclesial ties that bind us together as a global fellowship.

From one perspective, it may appear as if the manifold variety of groups now making up the “global church” only further compound the fragmentation I lamented in the previous essay. From another vantage point, however, I would suggest that the global character of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition today offers new ways to think about ecclesial unity. The missionary experience of needing to contextualize the gospel—as well as the visible markers of faithfulness—into dramatically different cultural settings, for example, could help Mennonites in North America relax their grip on the relatively narrow range of markers that now anchors their distinctive identity. The remarkable growth of indigenous churches, at a time when many Mennonite groups in North America are static or declining in number, could prompt a more radical reassessment of the focus on “boundary maintenance” that has often exacerbated the impulse to division. And the very variety of expressions of faith and life in the global church could help Mennonites in North America pursue a deeper sense of unity closer to home.

The argument that follows will unfold in three basic steps. Following a brief historical account of the phenomenal growth of the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship during the second half of the 20th century, I will propose several images or metaphors that may be helpful in making sense of this reality. More substantively, I will conclude with a constructive theological argument as to why and how Mennonite congregations in North America could be renewed by a more conscious embrace of their brothers and sisters in the Global South.

### **Globalization of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition**

By the end of the 17th century the movement of radical reform that made Anabaptists synonymous with the Peasants’ War of 1525 or the Münster debacle of 1535 had settled into a cluster of sober-minded, self-disciplined,

nonresistant congregations, worshipping at the edges of public culture in urban regions of the Netherlands and northern Germany, and often in secret in the rural territories of southwest Germany and Switzerland. Here, the principle of believers baptism kept them outside the officially established culture of the state church. The ensuing religious, cultural, and political marginalization of Mennonites in Europe (and later in North America) led many groups to recreate their own miniature versions of the *Corpus Christianum*—what John Howard Yoder once called “corpuscle Christianum”—where faith and culture fused into patterns of Christian identity that were inseparable from family identity and folk traditions.<sup>2</sup> Compared with other Reformation groups, the descendants of the Anabaptist movement remained a tiny minority. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were perhaps 225,000 baptized Anabaptist-Mennonites in the world. Apart from a handful of converts in Asia and Africa, virtually all of them resided in Europe (150,000) or North America (73,000).<sup>3</sup>

During the second half of the 20th century, however, all this began to change. Indeed, from the perspective of a 500-year-old tradition, the demographic transformation that has been taking place in the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship over the past 30 or 40 years is nothing short of phenomenal. By 1978, the Anabaptist family had grown to 610,000 members—with only 95,000 in Europe; a sharp increase to 315,000 in North America; and even more dramatic growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (from 3,000 to 200,000).<sup>4</sup> Today, only three decades later, the shift in the church’s center of gravity from North to South—a transformation that scholars such as Philip Jenkins, Lamin Sanneh, and Mark Noll have documented so insightfully for the larger Christian church—has continued.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality,” in *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary for Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 2-46, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Wilbert R. Shenk, “Mission and Service and the Globalization of North American Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70, no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 7-22, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> The literature on global Christianity is vast and growing rapidly. For a basic introduction see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004); Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering The West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL:

In 2011, Mennonite World Conference identified nearly 1.7 million baptized Anabaptists in 227 organized bodies, living in more than 80 different countries. Of these, only around 50,000 live in Europe, some 400,000 in North America, and the rest—well over a million—are part of the global Anabaptist fellowship. In 2002, the Meserte Kristos church of Ethiopia surpassed the number of Mennonites in the US to become the largest group, with Anabaptist groups in the Congo not far behind. Currently, Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, and their Mennonite Brethren North American counterparts—groups that have long pictured themselves as the organizational, financial, and intellectual centers of the Anabaptist tradition—constitute barely nine percent of the global Anabaptist fellowship.

The forces driving this growth are complex. Every individual group, of course, has its own story and context. But three distinct themes offer a small window into the dynamics behind this transformation.

### *1. “They Seek a Country”*

One source of globalization—often overlooked by Mennonites in the US—has been the diaspora of German-speaking Mennonites, many of them fleeing their homelands as refugees of government oppression or the ravages of wars. Thus, for example, in the early 1920s when provincial governments in Canada began to insist that Russian Mennonite immigrants teach their schoolchildren in English, several thousand Old Colony, or *Reinländer*, Mennonites immigrated to Mexico, followed several years later by another immigration of Sommerfelder, Bergthaler, and Chortizer Mennonites from Canada to the “Green Hell” of the Paraguayan Chaco. At about the same time in South Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution destroyed dozens of prosperous Mennonite colonies, forcing many of those who did not die of violence or starvation to flee as refugees—mostly to Paraguay and Brazil, and later to Uruguay and Bolivia. Those who remained behind faced the trauma of World War II, and then the iron-fisted policies of Stalin, who wanted to eliminate all forms of ethnic identity, especially those associated with religion. So, in the 1940s and 1950s, more Mennonite refugees fled, settling mostly in South America.

These Low German-speaking, colony-oriented Mennonites of Russian

origin have been joined in recent decades by several thousand émigré Beachy Amish and conservative Mennonites from the US who share their separatist convictions. Today, at least 150,000 of these Mennonites are scattered across Mexico, Central America, and South America.<sup>6</sup> The most conservative among them have established thriving colonies in isolated settings where they continue to speak German dialects and maintain the religious traditions and folkways of their European ancestors. The more progressive-minded have begun to settle in cities. The children and grandchildren of the immigrants are now fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, and many groups have demonstrated a deep interest in connecting with local cultures through missions and social services. These groups have continued to grow in virtually every country where they have settled; and in some countries—namely, Belize and Paraguay—they have come to exert a national economic and political influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

Mennonites in North America are largely ignorant of the magnitude of these Mennonite groups in Central and South America, though many would nonetheless recognize some sense of cultural and theological affinity with them.

## *2. Missions*

A second impulse behind the globalization of the Anabaptist tradition has been the missionary movement. Here North American Mennonites have followed the general trajectory of the larger history of Protestant missions, albeit with a typical time lag. The beginnings were very slow: Mennonites had established only seven missions before 1900, with another 18 initiated between 1900 and 1944. But by mid-century, a new generation—shaped by their experiences in Civilian Public Service or European relief work—became much more interested in the world. North American Mennonites established more than 50 new missions in the 1950s alone and another 75 since then, mostly in India, Africa, South America, and Asia.<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to these missions, thousands of Mennonite young people

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<sup>6</sup> For a superb summary of this story, see Royden Loewen, “To the Ends of the Earth: An Introduction to the Conservative Low German Mennonites in the Americas,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 3 (July 2008): 427–48.

<sup>7</sup> Shenk, “Mission and Service,” 9.

served as relief and service volunteers with Mennonite Central Committee (or the Teachers Abroad Program, PAX, or a dozen other international programs). These volunteers were people with practical skills, often more inclined to offer “the cup of cold water in Christ’s name” than to hold evangelistic services. These international mission, service, and relief initiatives had a profound impact. They not only brought the good news of the gospel to many previously unreached regions of the world, they also embodied a distinctive expression of gospel that linked Christian faith to a strong sense of community, a desire to follow Jesus in daily life, and a commitment to reconciliation and peacemaking, even at great personal cost. As a result, the reality of the global church has become much more visible to local congregations in North America. Today, virtually every Mennonite congregation in the US and Canada has some connection to the global church through a retired service worker, a short-term mission project, a sister-church relationship, or perhaps more indirectly through the *More With Less* cookbook, or an impulse of some members to make international crafts sold at the local “Ten Thousand Villages” store a central decorating motif in their homes.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. *Indigenization*

The real engine behind the dramatic growth in our worldwide fellowship, however, has come about through the “indigenization” of the missionary message—that is, in those countries where the recipients of the gospel brought to them by missionaries have retranslated it into their local context and made it genuinely their own. Here, the story of the Mennonite church in Ethiopia is especially instructive. Mennonite missionaries first arrived in Ethiopia in 1945, long after other Protestant missions had already been established there. In typical fashion, they initially focused on education and health care, establishing elementary schools, an institute for the deaf, and several clinics and hospitals.<sup>9</sup> The shift toward an indigenous church began in the late 1950s, when a charismatic revival movement prompted

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Steven M. Nolt, “Globalizing a Separate People: World Christianity and North American Mennonites, 1940-1990,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (Oct. 2010): 487-506.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dorothy Smoker, Chester L. Wenger, and Paul N. Kraybill, *God Led Us to Ethiopia* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1956).



the foundation of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC). But it was political events that led to the real transformation of the church. When Marxist revolutionaries came to power in Ethiopia in 1974, they quickly imposed restrictions on all forms of evangelical Christianity—harassing or arresting church leaders, sometimes beating them or holding them in custody for long periods of time. Still MKC members continued to meet. In 1982 the government officially closed the church and, for the next four years, held six of its key leaders in prison.<sup>10</sup>

Remarkably, however, the MKC church did not die. With their leaders imprisoned and their churches shut down, the MKC developed a new model of church life, strikingly Anabaptist in nature. Small cell groups, many led by women, met secretly in homes for prayer and Bible study. These groups quickly reorganized whenever they grew to 10 or 12 participants. Leaders developed a Bible study curriculum, which they printed on secret presses, and required new converts to undergo an extended period of instruction and Bible study. Above all, the underground church was sustained by prayer—regular sessions of intense intercession to God that often lasted for hours. Even though their gatherings were illegal, those who participated in the movement later recollected that “no one was afraid.”<sup>11</sup> The results of persecution, creative persistence, and prayer were astounding. Before the period of persecution the Meserete Kristos Church numbered around 10,000 members. In 1991, when persecution came to an end, it had grown to a fellowship of well over 50,000 baptized members. Today, there are some 175,000 baptized believers in the MKC church, making it the largest national Mennonite body in the world.<sup>12</sup>

The central themes of the Ethiopian story have since been repeated among other Anabaptist groups in many other countries. As local people have emerged into positions of leadership—and as the church has faced

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the full MKC story, see the chapter by Alemu Checole, “Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa,” in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: Global Mennonite History Series: Africa*, John Allen Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, Series Editors (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 191–253.

<sup>11</sup> The story is recounted in Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: An Amazing Half Century of Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948–1998* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the map of the Mennonite World Conference member census from 2009 posted at the MWC site: [www.mwc-cmm.org/images/files/MWCMa2009.pdf](http://www.mwc-cmm.org/images/files/MWCMa2009.pdf) (accessed July 20, 2012).

persecution—it has witnessed enormous growth: a church transformed in Indonesia amid ethnic and religious persecution; steady growth in the Congo in the face of prolonged civil war; renewal in Zimbabwe despite unimaginable economic hardships and a dictatorial regime.

### **Models of Ecclesial Unity: Making Sense of the Global Church**

At some level, Mennonites in North America are aware of all this. At a time when church membership on this continent is stagnant or declining, they are pleased to learn that “our numbers are growing” internationally. We hear these statistics, church papers are filled with stories about Mennonites in places like Congo, Zimbabwe, India, Colombia, or Australia, and local congregations are becoming aware that the “real action”—especially in terms of spiritual vitality, numerical growth, and renewal—is taking place in settings far from North America.

Yet, at the same time, many North American Mennonites are genuinely bewildered about what this transformation means. What is the glue that holds the global Anabaptist fellowship together? When a new church emerges in Ghana or Chile that calls itself “Mennonite,” what exactly do they mean by that term? Is it related in any way to what North American congregations understand when they use it? Lurking somewhere behind these questions are deeper concerns about marketing and identity—a desire to preserve the brand name of the franchise, and perhaps also an unspoken uneasiness about our own qualifications as heirs of the Anabaptist tradition.

For many years I have taught an elective course at Goshen College on Anabaptist-Mennonite history. I have always enjoyed the class, in part because it is a story that I know quite well. In my standard way of telling it, the past becomes a means of helping make sense of our own contemporary context, questions, and issues. The narrative begins in 16th-century Europe and moves in a reasonably linear path to the Mennonite church in North America today. Yet recently I have found new life and energy for the course by framing the story in a rather different way. How would I tell this history differently, I have begun to ask, if from the very beginning I assumed that the narrative arc of the story was not about “us”—the Mennonite Church USA? Rather, what new shape would the story take if I assumed that what God had in mind with the first adult baptisms on January 21, 1525 in

Zurich, Switzerland was the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church? What if the primary heirs of the story—those to whom the gift of this tradition was being entrusted—were the 1 million Mennonites outside Europe and North America who have no direct historical, cultural, or ethnic connections to the story? The challenge of reframing a familiar narrative has been wonderfully unsettling.

The fate of the North American Mennonite church, I believe, rests in our capacity to engage the growth and vitality of the church beyond our local, denominational, and national context. Yet we are far from clear about what that would mean. How do the bonds of trans-national ecclesial unity find expression? What are the crucial markers offering assurance that we are indeed part of the same family of faith?

One initial impulse in thinking about the unity of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship is to narrate the relationship in *historical*, or *genealogical*, terms. In this scenario, Mennonites describe their connection to each other by means of a family tree that ultimately has a taproot going back to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. So, if a group in Indonesia or Kenya asks what it means to be Mennonite, the answer proceeds historically, tracing a lineage back to a Mennonite missionary who first made contact with them, from there to the church in North America, and then back to Europe and to the history of the 16th-century Anabaptists. Global Mennonites can establish their identity by following a line of filial connection back to the Reformation disputes of the European 16th century.

Or perhaps we are inclined to describe the taproot primarily in *theological* language, in which all those who identify themselves as part of the group formally agree to adopt a core set of foundational Anabaptist convictions. In this model of ecclesial identity, the Mennonite church in North America serves as a kind of “accrediting agency,” defining a set of normative theological principles—Bender’s “The Anabaptist Vision” perhaps, or John Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus*, or maybe *The Naked Anabaptist*—that will qualify a group from the Global South to claim the name. The criteria for membership in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church will be defined by some distillation of the essence of Anabaptist theology, though what that essence looks like or who will do the defining remains somewhat ambiguous.

At one level, both of these approaches have an appeal. The Christian faith is always anchored in a tradition; and theological emphases will inevitably give shape and form to group identity, even if they are not explicitly named. History and theology are constitutive to identity. But both models suggest a pattern of relationships that I suspect we do not really want to affirm. In both instances, North Americans or European Mennonites become the gatekeepers of faithful Anabaptist identity, guardians of the franchise, at precisely a moment in time when Mennonites in both regions are struggling to sort out that identity themselves or asking themselves if indeed they even have a future.

No image for describing ecclesial relationships is perfect. The apostle Paul, of course, uses the metaphor of the body, insisting on the mutual importance and interdependency of each specific part (1 Cor. 12). An alternative image, one that might preserve certain elements of an Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology, is the biological metaphor of a *rhizome*. Rhizomes are plants that propagate by sending out a profusion of roots laterally horizontal to the soil above. At various points, the interconnected roots of a rhizome develop nodes that send sprouts up above the ground which appear in unexpected places. From the surface it seems as if these sprouts are quite distinct entities. But underground they are all joined together in a complex, interconnected web of horizontal relationships. Rhubarb, lilies, and bamboo are all rhizomes, as are aspen trees. Indeed, the Pando colony of aspens in Utah consists of nearly 50,000 trees extending over 105 acres; yet beneath the soil the colony is a single living organism. In fact, scientists have determined that damage done to trees in one part of the grove is “sensed” by other trees at a far distance.<sup>13</sup>

Mennonite World Conference is—by intention and perhaps also a bit by accident—a rhizomic organization. In contrast to many parallel organizations in other Christian communions, its administrative footprint is very small, and its primary emphasis has been on strengthening relationships between and among its member groups. The process leading up to the “Seven Shared Convictions,” for example, a statement of faith embraced by MWC member

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<sup>13</sup> Michael C. Grant, “The Trembling Giant,” *Discover* (October 1993). Available online at: [discovermagazine.com/1993/oct/thetremblinggian285](http://discovermagazine.com/1993/oct/thetremblinggian285) (accessed July 19, 2012).

groups in 2006, was slow and arduous, shaped by input from numerous area churches and by the insights of academically-trained theologians. The primary organization of MWC's most recent assemblies—in India (1997), Zimbabwe (2003), and Paraguay (2009)—has been borne almost entirely by local committees of the host conferences. Many publications in the Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Shelf of Literature are joint projects, linking authors from the global North and South.<sup>14</sup> The five-volume Global Mennonite History initiative has taken nearly 15 years to complete, largely because the project insisted on staying “close to the ground,” using local writers with a wide range of academic training who wrote in their own languages, many of them drawing on oral sources.

To argue that a global Anabaptist ecclesiology may ultimately be defined less by a shared genealogical taproot (that can find its way to the gospel only through the 16th-century Anabaptists), or by a set of carefully-worded confessional claims (that are ultimately created and managed by self-appointed gatekeepers in the North) should not be understood as an appeal to a Spiritualist understanding of the church. The retreat to an invisible church has frequently been a powerful temptation for those weary of organizational torpor, confessional wrangling, and all the petty idolatries that particular identities can foster. Instead, the ecclesial identity of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship may be defined by something far less linear, and far more risky—a vast inter-connected, sometimes unpredictable, web of relationships whose character, like that of the Holy Spirit itself, is likely always to exceed our capacity to grasp or pin down.

To be sure, the metaphor of a rhizome has limitations. The rich heritage of the Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition, the memory of the martyrs, the distinctive expression of Christian discipleship, the patterns of ecclesial formation—all these are roots shared by the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family that should not be ignored. And the fact that the visible sprouts of a rhizomic plant all look alike is sharply at odds with the rich variety of cultural expressions that the Anabaptist movement is taking today. Still, the image of a rhizome suggests that an Anabaptist ecclesiology is likely to emerge out of a complex, unpredictable constellation of intertwining,

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<sup>14</sup> A great example of this sort of collaboration is Pakisa Tshmika and Tim Lind, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

face-to-face relationships, many of them unplanned and many happening in settings outside academic halls or church buildings.

For example, one reason Rafael Arevalo's death mattered to me is that I have had students from the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña in my classes at Goshen College. My wife lived in the home of a Honduran Mennonite family for three months while she was in college. And my home congregation in Millersburg, Ohio has had a long-standing relationship with Honduran Mennonite churches; in fact, I heard the news of Arevalo's death from my brother-in-law, who happened to be leading a group of construction workers on a service trip to Honduras.

What would a rhizomic global church actually look like? What would it mean concretely to share in the suffering of those with whom we claim a connection? What would it look like for our congregationally-oriented tradition to become more committed to promoting rhizome growth? What sort of transformation of mind and heart—what kind of renewal—might be required of the nine percent of us who are used to thinking of ourselves as being at the center of the church rather than at the periphery?

### **The Earth is the Lord's**

In April 1525, only a few months after the first adult baptisms that had given birth to the Anabaptist movement, Zurich authorities arrested a young woman named Elsy Boumgartner on the charge of "rebaptism." But when they offered to release her if she would promise never to return to the area, Boumgartner stubbornly refused. Instead, she quoted the first verse from Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's," saying that "God had made the earth for her as well as for the rulers."<sup>15</sup> During the century that followed, persecuted Anabaptists returned repeatedly to this verse—"the earth is the Lord's"—referring to it in interrogation transcripts, confessional statements, letters of comfort, and even their hymns. The last Anabaptist to be executed in Switzerland, a seventy-year-old, self-educated farmer named Hans Landis, cited the verse repeatedly to government authorities before he was beheaded in 1614; and it offered comfort to many who did flee their homeland, often

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Arnold Snyder, "Margret Hottinger of Zollikon," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1996), 44.

in the form of a wall motto or an inscription posted in immigrant homes and worship spaces.<sup>16</sup>

“The earth is the Lord’s!” What was it that the Anabaptists found so compelling about that simple verse? And how might this claim open up new understandings for a global Anabaptist ecclesiology?

### *1. A Political Claim Regarding Sovereignty and Authority*

In the first place, as Elsy Boumgartner and Hans Landis argued, the claim that “the earth is the Lord’s” is a fundamental declaration about political sovereignty, authority, and identity. Throughout the long sweep of their history, Anabaptist-Mennonites have generally respected the ordering function of the state in its mandate to protect the good and to punish evil-doers. Yet until recently Mennonites in North America have generally regarded citizenship as possessing only relative importance. Becoming a Christian, the Anabaptists taught, means that you are now joined to a new body—the Body of Christ—whose life in worship, in breaking bread, in washing each other’s feet, in sharing possessions, and in mutual admonition and encouragement demonstrates to the world what the Kingdom of God looks like. Membership in the visible Body of Christ, we have argued, has a prior and more fundamental claim on our time, our resources, our identity, our allegiance, and even on our life itself, than anything else, including the nation. And if the church is truly the Body of Christ in the world, then it—not the nation—is our primary point of reference for understanding and engaging the world.

This commitment to clarifying and ordering political allegiances has taken a wide variety of expressions. In the US, for example, Mennonites have traditionally been hesitant to pledge their allegiance to the flag or to put their hands over their hearts during the national anthem. I vividly remember my grandfather telling me stories of his experiences during World War I at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio.<sup>17</sup> Once he was roused out of bed in

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. James W. Lowry, David J. Rempel Smucker, and John L. Ruth, *Hans Landis, Swiss Anabaptist Martyr*, in *Seventeenth Century Documents* (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> For a full collection of stories—many of them quite traumatic—of World War I conscientious objectors, see Jonas Smucker Hartzler, *Mennonites in the World War; Or, Nonresistance Under Test* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Pub. House, 1922).

the middle of the night, forced to go to the edge of camp, dig a grave, and lie down in it—assuming he was about to be shot—because he refused to put on a military uniform. Communal memories are still alive from World War II of church buildings painted yellow or lynch mobs showing up at the homes of those refusing to buy war bonds. In more recent years, Mennonites in North America have nurtured other forms of witness to the larger world, through programs like PAX, Mennonite Disaster Service, the Teachers Abroad Program, or numerous other volunteer relief and social service assignments that have helped them connect at a deep level with people from many different countries and cultures.

Of course, the lure of national tribalism remains powerful, especially in the context of a democracy where the rituals of citizenship nurture deep, if often subtle, identification with the nation-state. Particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the social and political culture in the US has been deeply shaped by a climate of fear. As a result, Mennonites have become more active participants in divisive political rhetoric that pits Christians against Christians, often in our own congregations. But at their best, Mennonites in the US and Canada have found ways to express deep gratitude to their country while still carrying their passports somewhat lightly, not assuming that the benefits and freedoms provided by governments were “rights” to be bought at the price of other people’s blood, and always ready to move elsewhere if the nation decided we could no longer be tolerated. If the whole earth is the Lord’s, then Christians will find themselves at home anywhere in the world.

To those North American Mennonites inclined towards passionately following public policy debates on either the Left or the Right, Psalm 24 is a *political* statement. It is an assertion about sovereignty and authority and trust, reminding us that Jesus calls us to be part of a fellowship of believers whose identity transcends national boundaries, and that the future of the Kingdom of God does not hang in the balance of an election in Canada or the United States. If “the *earth* is the Lord’s”— if God is Lord of the *whole* world—then our allegiance to the Body of Christ comes before all other allegiances. If “the earth is the Lord’s,” then we must take seriously the claim that “in Christ there is no east or west, in Him no south or north; but one



great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”<sup>18</sup>

As one practical suggestion for cultivating a deeper sense of the global character of Christ’s Body, consider undertaking the following exercise as spiritual discipline or a Lenten practice. Imagine how differently we might look at the world if, for a season of time, we would resolve to turn off BBC, CBC, Fox News, CNN, NPR or all the standard news media sources we currently depend on for information on the important things happening in the world. Instead, we would agree to tune into news reports sent to us only by MCC, Mennonite World Conference, our mission agencies, or our sister churches in the Global South.<sup>19</sup> If we believe that “the earth is the Lord’s,” then we will need to reclaim Anabaptist practices that help us view the world through the eyes of Jesus rather than the lens of the nation.

## *2. A New Understanding of Possessions*

The Psalmist’s declaration that “the earth is the Lord’s” is also likely to unsettle our assumptions about possessions. Over and over again in their history Mennonites have encountered a fundamental paradox. Wherever they emigrated—whether to Penn’s Woods, the plains of South Russia, the scrubland of the Paraguayan Chaco, or the fertile soil of Waterloo County, Ontario—they struggled against enormous obstacles. But they eventually flourished. A tradition of mutual aid, combined with a strong work ethic, a tendency toward large families, and a firm conviction that God would bless their labors have consistently translated into economic wealth. Yet almost inevitably another pattern also emerged. The land and opportunities Mennonites received from God as a gift quickly became possessions, rightfully owned because they had been earned by hard work and wise decision-making. As a group, Mennonites in North America today are very comfortable. And along with their wealth, they have become increasingly insulated from dependence on God and on each other.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul did not mince his words to

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<sup>18</sup> The hymn, which appears in many Protestant hymnals, was written by John Oxenham in 1908.

<sup>19</sup> I made this suggestion as part of a larger critique of the partisan nature of US Mennonite political involvement in a C. Henry Smith lecture: John D. Roth, “Called to One Peace: Christian Faith and Political Witness in a Divided Culture,” *Mennonite Life* (Online), 60, no. 2 (June 2005). Available (with responses) online at [www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005June/](http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005June/).

wealthy members of the congregation who turned a blind eye to the needs of poor members. The rich ate sumptuous meals while other brothers and sisters looked on, hungry and thirsty. And then the whole congregation would all gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper. That's wrong, Paul told them! In fact, "that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor. 11:30). To say that the "earth is the Lord's" is a reminder that all Creation belongs to God. If political leaders have no ultimate claim over the things of this earth, then neither do we—the earth is the Lord's, not ours.

This is not a new insight for Mennonites. Deep within their tradition, they have always had a profound appreciation for the gift of God's abundance. One expression this has taken is seen among the Hutterites, descendants of the Anabaptists who regard private possessions as a mark of the Fall—a direct consequence of sin. The gift of salvation—of becoming "new creatures in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17)—they taught, is an invitation to be liberated from the burden of possessiveness and the economies of scarcity. In their view, radical economic sharing was a foundational principle of Christian life.

Most Mennonites today do not practice community of goods. But the best of their tradition has always cultivated a deep commitment to caring for each other in the generous sharing of possessions. Each year, for instance, the Relief Sales held in dozens of Mennonite communities generate millions of dollars for people in need around the world. But such attitudes are also evident in the humbler practices within congregations of bringing meals to the sick, showing up on work projects, or offering financial assistance to members in times of crisis. At the heart of all this is the virtue of stewardship. If the "earth is the Lord's," then the gift of the Mennonite tradition is to remind us that we are merely stewards—that the fruits of the earth belong not to us but to God, and that we are called to share the bounty that has been entrusted to us freely and joyfully with others.

### *3. The Lordship of Christ*

Finally, beneath all this is an even more fundamental claim. To say with the Psalmist that "the earth is the Lord's" is not only an affirmation about political sovereignty or economic stewardship; it is ultimately a confession that God has entered history in the person of Jesus Christ, that Jesus rose victorious from the grave in victory over the forces of sin and death, and that

the outcome of history has already been settled. It is a statement of praise and worship.

The 16th-century Anabaptists were not naive about the power of sin and evil in the world. They knew from personal experience that humans were capable of inflicting enormous cruelties on each other. They did not hold to sentimental or romantic notions that “turning the other cheek” or “being nice” was going to make tyrants put down their weapons. Nor were they liberal optimists who saw nonresistance as a political strategy that could guarantee effective results. To the contrary. They often envisioned the world in fairly stark terms as a cosmic battle between the forces of evil and the forces of good—the Schleithem Confession describes it as a struggle between Christ and Belial or between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. And many suffered deeply for their faith. But the reason that so many Anabaptist martyrs could go to their deaths with resolve and confidence—some of them singing amid the flames—was their absolute certainty that God had already won the victory, that Satan would ultimately be defeated, that love was the most powerful force in the universe, and that life would win out over death.

This legacy of costly discipleship, symbolized so powerfully in the testimony of the *Martyrs Mirror*, should not be understood as a glorification of suffering in itself. Rather, it speaks to a deep recognition of the fact that, since “the earth is the Lord’s,” followers of Jesus can enter into the fellowship of suffering with brothers and sisters in other parts of the world knowing that God has already triumphed over the forces of evil. Because God has won the victory, Christians today can share in Christ’s ministry of healing and reconciliation and in the confident hope of the resurrection.

### **A Concluding Story**

One spring day several years ago, while driving through the isolated Costa Rican province of San Carlos, I stumbled rather unexpectedly upon a fascinating microcosm of the global Anabaptist fellowship. My first clue was a group of local women, walking along the muddy mountain road, dressed in normal clothes but wearing devotional coverings that looked vaguely familiar. Then, at the outskirts of the tiny village of Pitál, I encountered a simple brick homestead surrounded by a manicured yard. The Penner family,

as it turned out, were Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites who had moved to Pitál from Spanish Lookout, Belize only a few years earlier. The patriarch of the family had grown up in Manitoba, but his wife was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and they had raised their children in Belize. On the mantel were faded photographs of great-grandparents, born in Tsarist Russia and among the wave of 35,000 Russian Mennonites who emigrated to North America in the 1870s in search of religious freedom and new economic opportunities.

Just up the road from the Penners lived the Yoder family, part of a sprawling clan of Beachy Amish who had come from Virginia to Costa Rica as missionaries in the 1960s. Over coffee around their kitchen table I heard stories from their past that went back to colonial Pennsylvania, and beyond that to Alsace and Switzerland. This was only the beginning of a long series of visits through the afternoon and into the evening as I went from home to home of Costa Rican Mennonites who had assumed leadership of the local church and were in the midst of an aggressive church planting effort in the surrounding countryside.<sup>20</sup>

Here, woven together within this tiny greenhouse of Mennonite ecumenicity, were the threads of a wonderfully complex story: born out of the same 16th-century renewal movement in central Europe, two traditions had traversed oceans, continents, and cultures before meeting up again nearly five centuries later in a remote region in Central America; but the future of these traditions was clearly in the hands of energized second-generation Costa Rican Mennonites, who had adopted some—but not all—of the distinctive practices of their missionary teachers.

The form of the Mennonite witness in Costa Rica's San Carlos region is still unfolding. But in the worship service that I attended, I had a fleeting glimpse of the heavenly vision of the Apocalypse of John in which people of every nation and tribe are joined together in praise to God. Hanging on the roughhewn walls of the meetinghouse was a verse from Psalm 24: "Del Señor, es la tierra y su plentitud" – "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof!" The Costa Rican pastor preached in Spanish to a congregation

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<sup>20</sup> The story of this community can be traced in part through a history of its origins as told by Sanford Yoder and Elva Miller, *God's Call to Costa Rica: Experiences 1968-1970* (Stuarts Draft, VA: Mrs. Amos Miller, 1977) and through the pages of *La Antorcha de la Verdad*, a devotional periodical published by the community.

seated on benches, separated by gender. Together we sang gospel hymns, accompanied by a guitar and a creative variation of four-part harmony. The potluck that followed featured rice and beans, and the conversation shifted fluidly from Spanish to German to English. Through it all, there was no mistaking the warmth that is possible only through the fellowship of the Spirit. “The Earth is the Lord’s.”

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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, Ernst Hamm, and Roger Epp.

## 2012 SAWATSKY LECTURE

### **Mightier than the Sword: *Martyrs Mirror* in the New World**

*Julia Spicher Kasdorf*

#### **The Unreadable Book**

Even now, I can hardly bear to open it. I know too much and too little about the big book that always leaves me feeling small. Unable to get past the title page, I once wrote a paper for a graduate seminar that traced the evolution of the Dutch printer's mark and motto that appeared on the title pages of numerous German editions published in North America, without ever opening my own copy of the 16th printing of the second English edition, inscribed as a 28th birthday gift from my parents in 1990.<sup>1</sup> To be fair, I must say that I asked for it. They wouldn't have thought to give it to me otherwise, and that difference—my deliberate quest, compared to the fact that they already owned one that came from I-don't-know-where—says something about the way martyr memory works in our Mennonite community.

For as long as I can remember, it was the biggest book on our shelves, among novels, a complete set of Bible commentaries, and other useful non-fictions such as car repair manuals, gardening references, and edifying biographies. As hard to handle as an unabridged dictionary, impossible to read in bed, the tome like a tomb for the dying and dead and not yet resurrected, intimidated me with its many pages of double-columned type with red ink splatterings on the page ends that, as a kid, I believed to be the actual blood of the martyrs. Former Herald Press publisher Levi Miller recently assured me that this is not the case; those marks are added to hide dust that collects on the ends of books that stand long on the shelf, unopened.

Recognizing that *Martyrs Mirror* now functions mostly as a treasured, if unread, object in mainstream Mennonite culture, Miller and others at Herald Press published a new gift edition in 2002. They chose to retain the

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kasdorf, "Work and Hope': Tradition and Translation of an Anabaptist Adam," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (1994): 178-204.

red splatterings at an additional production cost of about \$1 per copy. Dutch immigrant Jan Gleysteen designed a new dust jacket and the handsome, fake leather binding embossed with “a rose among thorns,” the symbol of martyrdom that early Christians used to refer to the persecuted Church, and that *Martyrs Mirror* writers later used to refer to Anabaptists.<sup>2</sup> Dreadful torture and death symbolized by a thing of beauty—like the big book itself.

As a grown-up, I still find that book unbearable, but now for other reasons. Its strident biases alarm me: the Catholic Church called “the whore of Babylon,” for instance, centuries after John, writing the book of Revelation, used that phrase to refer to Roman persecution. And then there are the haunting engravings created by Jan Luyken, a poet who illustrated books to make a living. Those pictures made me think I already knew what the book was about, the way Americans assume they know what happens in *Moby Dick* without ever reading it: hangings, stonings, crucifixions, decapitations, burnings at the stake, burials alive, drowning, torture by means of hot tongs and brands, racks, thumb screws, or tongue screws to prevent the faithful from “giving good witness.” As the martyrs sang or spoke and sometimes forgave their executioners, their speeches and songs made their deaths meaningful. From early times, testimony was the primary definition of the word “martyrdom,” torture and death merely secondary means.

Countless acts of articulation are contained in the book big: consider all the letters, records of court testimony (sometimes quite witty and belligerent), observers’ eyewitness accounts, or the editor’s own shrill arguments. All that language feels contradictory to the way we lived when I was young. Back then, my parents—who had grown up in Amish and Mennonite farm homes in Central Pennsylvania, but who were no longer farmers themselves—were not especially vocal. They didn’t protest or vote or write letters to newspapers or lawmakers or otherwise publically bear witness to their convictions about matters like the war in Viet Nam, which

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<sup>2</sup> Levi Miller, e-mail message to author, May 6, 2010. In the late 1990s, Herald Press bound the book in soft cover to market it at a much lower cost to those who buy the book to read rather than revere, but that decision proved unwise from a financial standpoint. According to Miller, the 2002 luxury edition was not prompted by post-9/11 militarization. Reflecting on his motivation for the enrichments on the new printing, he wrote, “I always considered the *Martyrs Mirror* ... our signature book as a Mennonite publisher and deserving all the attention we could afford.”

they absolutely opposed. If our copy of *Martyrs Mirror* had anything to do with their attitude toward militarization or their disengagement from public life, that also went unsaid. Yet I have come to believe that the big book—or more precisely, the memory it fostered and still fosters—strongly influenced our home and the homes of other Mennonites like us.

How does a book that I don't recall ever seeing anyone read, a book I find almost unreadable myself, convey so much meaning? How does an unread text inspire imagination and shape behavior?

As I investigate these questions, I will trace a relationship between the printing of *Martyrs Mirror* and American Mennonites' experience with war. My primary interest is not the history of the book or the ways Mennonites have changed their views with regard to pacifism and engagement with the state. Rather, the relationship between war and the book creates the shape of a story onto which I can begin to map some ideologies of sacrifice and self-denial that are grounded in cultural memory and the function of *Martyrs Mirror* in creating that memory.

I deliberately choose a word from political, not spiritual, discourse—"ideology"—to name the set of ideas that shape expectations, actions, and goals, and that get reproduced within the group as normative, just "common sense." Typically ideology is invisible, necessarily unconscious. When the group espouses a minority position, however, its difference is exposed, its ideology rendered explicit for both the dominant context and the indigenous faithful. At the point of contact with the dominant world view, ideological difference becomes evident and signifies—even clarifies—identity: "just what we do" escalates into "what it means to be us." The implicit becomes explicit, the underlying becomes the immediate, and this shift is often fraught with conflict and feeling, failures of speech and argument. One example of the way implicit ideology become explicit and engendered controversy occurred in 2010, when Goshen College, a Mennonite educational institution in the United States, suddenly had to explain why it had never played the national anthem or raised the American flag at athletic events when asked to do so by non-Mennonite student baseball players.

Many Christians embrace a commitment to nonviolence as the way of faith, but I am curious about the specific ways *Martyrs Mirror* has been used to promote ideologies not simply of *nonviolence* (by which I mean the term



that gets translated from the title of *Martyrs Mirror* as “defenseless”—those who refuse to use weapons and inevitably find themselves at odds with civil authority), but also *nonresistance*, which I use to mean a more general ethic of non-engagement or passive resistance. Nonresistance I also associate with an attitude of self-denial or retreat, a stance that may result in a failure to put forth one’s own interests in social or other contexts. It has become necessary for me to try to understand these ideologies of sacrifice, because I have reached a place in life where I find I must think differently about self-denial if I am going to be able to keep thinking or talking at all.

Following Elizabeth Castelli’s work on early Christian martyr accounts, I use theories of memory and the creation of culture to discuss the function that the big book has played in Mennonite communities.<sup>3</sup> Like Castelli, I am interested in the text’s significance for the writers and communities that produced it, and especially the meanings it grants to subsequent generations. In other words, I am curious about *what* the big book has come to mean, and *how* those meanings have come to dictate behaviors initially related to nonviolence, and then to self-sacrifice or self-denial.

Thieleman Janz van Braght well understood the work of memory and the making of culture. He compiled *Martyrs Mirror* from earlier sources at a time when national identity in the Dutch republic was constructed, in part, by offering to schoolchildren the gruesomely illustrated history of the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands, *Mirror for the Young or the Spanish Tyranny*.<sup>4</sup> To this day, Dirk Willems is remembered in the Netherlands not so much as an Anabaptist martyr but as a hero who resisted Spanish rule.<sup>5</sup> For all religious denominations, martyrologies were popular ways of establishing religious identity in the 17th century. The two metaphors he chose for the title of his compendium of many previously-published narratives signal the ideological intent of his project and point to the sorts of cultural production that Castelli theorizes: “The Bloody Theatre” announces that the book is a site where we can view the martyr spectacles eternally. This is an exclusive

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Mostaert, *Spiegel der Jeughd of Spaanse Tyrannie* (Amsterdam, 1620) cited in Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Random House, 1987), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Sprunger made this point in a public response to this paper at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, November 8, 2012.

stage reserved only for those martyrs who were “defenseless” (nonviolent) and baptized as adults, the non-negotiable distinctives that Van Braght sought to establish as marks of the truest, yet minor strands in Christianity, from the time of Jesus until 1660.

In the 17th century, the term “mirror” was commonly used in the titles of instruction books or manuals. A casual glance of titles held in the British Library calls up these examples: *The Catholic Mirror or a Looking Glass for Protestants whereby they can see the errors of their church . . .* (Paris, 1662) and *The Cloud of Witnesses; or, the Sufferers Mirrour, made up of the swanlike-songs and other choice passages of several martyrs and confessors to the sixteenth century . . .* (London, 1670). Thus, it is not so much that we should expect to see ourselves in the “mirror,” cast in the role of the faithful giving good witness, but that this book and others like it will show us images that aim to train us toward an identity shaped by the memory the book maintains.

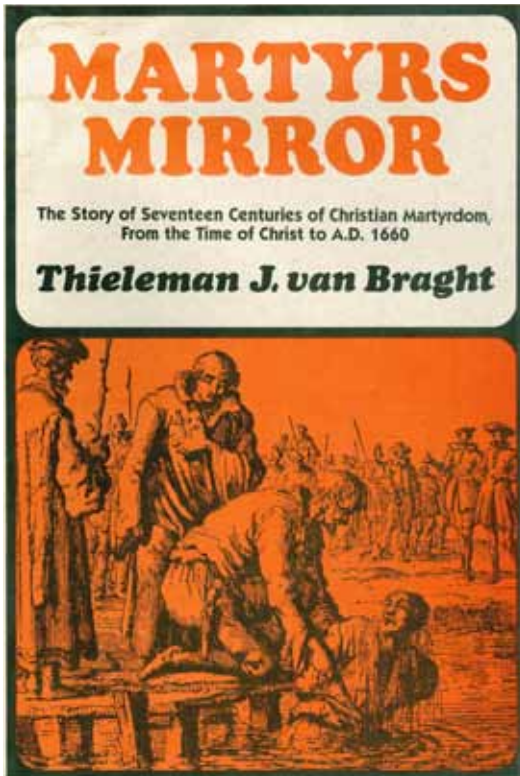
By means of memory and imagination, young minister Van Braght sought to remind Mennonites living in the Dutch Golden Age of their martyr heritage, even as they were busy buying and selling opulent homes and gardens, wearing fashionable clothing sewn from expensive imported cloth, and hosting lavish banquets. You can almost see him wringing his hands as he contrasts the self-indulgent lifestyles of his contemporaries with the self-denial of the martyrs:

O how different is this [current age] from the life of a true Christian, who has forsaken himself and his lusts. How great the step that is between their world and that of the holy martyrs, who delivered up, not only their carnal desires, but also their bodies and lives, unto death for the Lord’s sake!<sup>6</sup>

(“How will they give up their lives, when they can’t even spare their hot tubs?” could be the contemporary paraphrase.) Van Braght associates Christian martyrdom with a life-style of self-denial. Where our treasures lie, our hearts will surely be, and simplicity is a virtue, but is the martyr’s sacrifice

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<sup>6</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, ed. *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 10.



analogous to refraining from conspicuous consumption? A relationship between these different kinds of sacrifice is long and deep, and, I think, often conflated in the ideologies that stem from memory associated with *Martyrs Mirror*.

Did an ethic of “more-with-less” austerity select grocery bag paper for the dust jacket on the mid-twentieth century *Martyrs Mirror* we had at home? Consider what can be gathered from just its cover. (See image at left.) Here we have the engraving of a drowning in the typically scripted sacrificial scene: a Catholic priest stands on the dock, on hand in case the

heretic sees the errors of his ways; his eyes are closed in prayer or disdain. Although he clutches a cross to his heart, he remains blind to the fact that this martyr follows the true way of Christ. A civil official stands beside him in a rich robe and hat, wielding the knotty rod of judgment: church and state stand in cahoots, not to be trusted by us. Behind a pair of dandies dressed in rich doublets is the crowd of gawkers. Indeed, there must always be a crowd for this spectacle to be effective from any side’s point of view—either the martyr giving good witness or the authorities setting an example for the rest.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider make this and other observations about the reception of the big book in their very readable compilation of engravings and narratives, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 13.



We are among them too, of course, gawking with them, gawking at them, gawking at the executioner and his victim, who hold one another in a final gaze, almost intimate. If I were to open the book and search to page 1,090, I would find the story of this man, Mattheus Mair, the final moment of his life in 1592 captured by a Jan Luyken engraving (see above), described this way:

Now when the executioner had thrust brother Mattheus into the water, he drew him out again three or four times, and each time asked him whether he would recant. But he always said, “no,” as long as he was able to speak; hence he was drowned, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of July, through the power of God steadfastly persevering in the faith.

He always said “no,” as long as he was able to speak. That’s the line that sticks in my mind, plain-spoken and unequivocal. Enduring a torture

similar to water-boarding—not long ago sanctioned by American president George W. Bush—Brother Mattheus always said “no” as long as he was able to speak. “Through the power of God,” the text says, he remained stubborn in his resistance, refusing to deny his truth, nonviolent yet steadfast unto death. As long as he could speak, he resisted, and that resistance made his “good witness.”

Book of refusals.

Book of good witness.

Book of excess.

Book of denials.

Book that speaks for silent people.

Book forever saying “no.”

What is the meaning of that kind of hero?

### **Some Other Kinds of Heroes**

The story of the translation and publication of the Dutch *Martyrs Mirror* in colonial North America has been told many times. In the early 1740s, fearing that war between England and France would conscript their sons, Mennonite leaders in Pennsylvania petitioned the continental Assembly for military exemption on the basis of their religious beliefs. The Assembly deferred their request because they did not have authority to rule on the matter; instead, they told the Mennonites to appeal to the Royal Majesty of Great Britain. In a 1745 letter to their Dutch Mennonite brethren, the Americans described their response to that suggestion with a humble nonresistance that nearly lapses into voicelessness:

. . . we find ourselves powerless, weak and incapable of seeking such a matter in our littleness at such a court and high power, and in this case see no course before us but to entrust it to the one eternal and almighty God, who has hitherto graciously protected our province from all hostile attacks, so that we can

still live in peace.<sup>8</sup>

The letter was signed by six leaders from the Skippack area, immigrants or the children of immigrants who claimed to blame themselves for the vulnerable state of their affairs: “We acknowledge our misstep in coming to so distant a land without sufficient assurance concerning freedom of conscience.”<sup>9</sup>

This language no doubt reflects epistolary style of the time, but I am struck by the flat refusal even to attempt negotiation. Instead of petitioning the crown, the leaders determined that the big book would help their cause; rather than attempt to change public policy, they retreated to publish *Martyrs Mirror*. A German translation was needed, they explained, so that “our posterity may have before their eyes the traces of those loyal witnesses of the truth, who walked in the way of truth and have given their lives for it.” The Ephrata edition was thus central to the Mennonite leaders’ efforts to “make every preparation for steadfast constancy in our faith,” that is, to reinforce an ideology of nonviolence in the New World.<sup>10</sup>

The Ephrata *Martyrs Mirror* was fully translated and printed in three years by the community of Seventh Day Baptist Brethren on the frontier at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. At more than 1,500 pages, it was the largest book produced in colonial America. The brothers made their own ink and paper with rags gathered from as far away as Philadelphia. They imported type from Germany but also had to cast some themselves.<sup>11</sup> About 1,300 copies were finally completed, and the first was finished six years before the Seven Years’ War reached the colony. Thereafter, we can trace a relationship between the printing of the big book in the United States and the nation’s military history. The book also served an identity-keeping function in Canada. Mennonite farmers carried copies of it to Waterloo County, Ontario, in the late 18th and early 19th century, in a migration that has been regarded as a nonresistant

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<sup>8</sup> Richard K. MacMaster with Samuel L. Horst and Robert F. Ullé, *Conscience in Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739-1789: Interpretation and Documents* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Hruschka, *How Books Came to America: The Rise of the American Book Trade* (State College, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2012), 37-48.

response to the American Revolution.

The urgent motivation for the Ephrata edition continued to shape later understandings of the book's publication. Mennonite leader J. C. Wenger, a native son of that early Skippack community, observed that the 1814 German edition was said to have been prompted by the War of 1812—a war that was fought entirely with American volunteers—but he could find no real evidence to support that tradition.<sup>12</sup> The first English edition, printed in Lancaster County in 1837, was more likely a reflection of changes in language use and the publishers' hopeful, if doomed, financial speculations. The notion that no North American Mennonite library could be complete without the big book probably drove the printings of both English and German editions through the 19th century.<sup>13</sup> (In Pennsylvania and Elkhart, Indiana, *Martyrs Mirror* was one in a group of several Anabaptist texts published because they were believed to represent core Mennonite beliefs.)

After the Civil War, the Mennonite Publishing Company at Elkhart issued a new English edition translated from the 1660 Dutch original. The preface, probably written by publisher John F. Funk, states an ideological purpose that echoes Van Braght's rationale: that the representations of "unfaltering endurance under the severest persecution are powerful incentives" to "live a more consecrated life, to practice greater self-denial, to live more separated from the world, and to show a greater zeal in the work of the Lord and the salvation of souls."<sup>14</sup> The phrases "separation from the world" and "self-denial" suggest personal and communal positions of withdrawal and sacrifice appropriate to a time when Mennonite life was

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<sup>12</sup> J. C. Wenger, *History of the Mennonites of the Franconia Conference* (Telford, PA: Franconia Mennonite Historical Society, 1937), 62.

<sup>13</sup> In the Ontario Mennonite community, approximately 20 Ephrata editions remain, and approximately 160 1814 English editions are known to have survived. In addition, a number of the 1780 Pirmasens edition, a reprint of the Ephrata edition produced in the Palatinate, came directly to Ontario with Amish immigrants from Europe. During the 19th century, for Pennsylvania Mennonites, the choice to move to Canada was similar to a choice to move to Ohio or Indiana, largely determined by the availability of inexpensive land. Migrations across the border were not uncommon. Religious identity—as a historically German-speaking peace church—rather than national identity was primary, and *Martyrs Mirror* served as an expression of that identity. Phone conversation with Sam Steiner, February 16, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> John F. Funk, Preface to Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1886).

rapidly changing as industrialization and the railroad had finally reached rural areas. Christians practiced self-denial and separation by living more simply than their worldly neighbors. It was no longer necessary to bear witness to the world through the public loss of their own lives.

This all changed with the First World War, when Mennonites and other pacifists faced conscription in a highly charged, popular conflict, with no clear governmental provisions for conscientious objection. Melanie Springer Mock, in a study of the diaries of Mennonite conscientious objectors (COs) from this era, finds that militarized mainstream America used the language of Christian martyrdom to describe the sacrifices of soldiers serving in European trenches. At the same time, harassed Mennonite conscientious objectors identified with their own history of Anabaptist suffering in a contest of dueling martyrs.<sup>15</sup> In 1917, for instance, the Mennonite weekly newspaper *Gospel Herald* praised the “martyr spirit” of COs who refused non-combatant service, although they stood to face “persecution, even death” in army training camps and federal prisons. The piece concluded that “This is a good time to read the story of how many of our fathers went to the stake rather than compromise their faith.”<sup>16</sup>

*Gospel Herald* editor Daniel Kauffman and Aaron Loucks, General Manager of the Mennonite Publishing Company, led the “old” Mennonite response to conscription from Scottdale, Pennsylvania. Loucks met with Secretary of War Baker in Washington and passed on information and advice through *Gospel Herald*.<sup>17</sup>

The same 1917 issue of *Gospel Herald* reprinted an opinion piece by C. B. Schmidt that had appeared in the *Kansas Evening Republican* which dramatized the martyr/soldier comparison, noting that the Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence was punished with martyrdom in Europe long ago, and that Mennonites now faced similar persecution:

[The Mennonites’] early history has been written in blood,  
because of their abhorrence of strife and bloodshed. Their

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<sup>15</sup> Melanie Springer Mock, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 124-27.

<sup>16</sup> “The Martyrs’ Spirit,” *Gospel Herald* (November 8, 1917): 585.

<sup>17</sup> James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989): 214.



steadfastness and their very single-mindedness has produced among them thousands of martyrs, heroes, infinitely more heroic than the greatest soldiers of history.<sup>18</sup>

The message here is unmistakable: my nonresistant hero is better than your soldier hero! The glorified martyr functions in opposition to the decorated warrior in Mennonite imagination: a figure of heroic, masculine virtue defined by self-sacrifice.

An explicit comparison between Christian martyrs and soldiers is firmly grounded in church history and tradition since Roman times, according to L. Stephanie Cobb in *Dying to be Men*, her recent study of language and gender in those martyrologies. Drawing on the work of several other scholars of the second century, she clarifies one purpose of the early Christian writers: to depict martyrs who suffered torture and death not as victims, but as courageous, brave heroes; that is, not as barbarians, but as ideal Romans. Indeed, she finds in the language of the ancient texts that “authors appropriated cultural indicators of masculinity to challenge the perception of Christian weakness and victimization.”<sup>19</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, virtue was associated with masculinity. Early Christian martyrs—whether they were men or women—were portrayed as paragons of the qualities ascribed to masculinity: courage, steadfastness, bravery, justice, and willingness to sacrifice their own lives. A “no pain, no gain” ethic of spiritual combat and triumph prevailed in these early representations, as martyrs resembled athletes, gladiators, and soldiers in the arena.

Cobb shows that men and women were equally associated with manly traits, but the female martyrs faced persecution as *both* virile heroes *and* virtuous women, who are cast back into positions of domestic femininity, described in the arena as beautiful, fertile (maternal), and modest.<sup>20</sup> (In other words, they did everything the men did, but they did it in high heels, nursing infants.) We see elements of this combination of idealized masculine and feminine qualities carried into women’s stories in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

Among them is the teacher Ursula of Essen (1570), racked twice, hanged and flogged, gagged on her way to the stake to keep her from “giving

<sup>18</sup> C. B. Schmidt, “Mennonites and the War,” *Gospel Herald* (November 8, 1917): 589.

<sup>19</sup> L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2009), 125.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-123.



good witness” (see above). According to the text, as she passed by the prison, Ursula heard her Anabaptist sisters shouting from their cell windows, encouraging her “to contend manfully.”<sup>21</sup>

The brief, unillustrated story of Christina Haring (1533) even more vividly portrays the ideal manly/womanly martyr who, captured while pregnant, “remained steadfast in faith.” She was released from prison until she gave birth, and “though she knew that she would be apprehended again, and might have escaped ten times, or even more, she did not flee, but boldly remained.” Haring perished by the sword, which, the text takes care to point out, “was not usually done with a woman”; she had “steadfastly” endured, and her body was burnt afterward.<sup>22</sup> The final summary of her narrative is a fascinating mix of highly gendered ideals:

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<sup>21</sup> *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 844.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

This courageous, heroic woman or sister in Christ, who forsook her husband, infant, house and home, and all temporal things, strengthened her womanly heart with such valiant manliness, and by the grace of God so armed herself in the faith, that she paid her vow unto the Lord, and joyfully went to meet Christ her bridegroom, with her lamp burning, and her light shining so that many were filled with astonishment.<sup>23</sup>

Haring is courageous, heroic, valiant in manliness, armed, beholden to a Lord (like a knight), and a light to the world; at the same time, she is a woman, a sister, a womanly heart bereft of baby, house and home; she is a bride of Christ, and a faithful virgin (holding the lamplight)! This description, especially if it is read in relation to the early Christian genre, reveals not passive victimhood and self-denial but a wealth of metaphors suggestive of active resistance and articulate witness, however subject she must be to conventions of proper femininity. Her choice not to flee with her newborn baby—unlike Mary and Joseph who were led to Egypt with the baby Jesus—follows early Christian understandings of sacrifice and God’s providence.<sup>24</sup> It also demonstrates that she made a decision to face execution, and this choice determined that she would be remembered as a martyr. Haring chose and acted so that her tale becomes not one of self-denial or silence but of public resistance.

The example of this type of heroic, public martyr was enlisted by Mennonite leaders during the middle of the 20th century to oppose another swell of public support for military service and sacrifice. In 1938, the Mennonite Publishing Company released another English edition of *Martyrs Mirror*. Ten years later, Gerald C. Studer wrote:

[The *Martyrs Mirrors*] were published with the intention that such stories of heroism would inspire the reader to maintain the faith by a similar courage. In this way they would serve as a means of uplift in days of affliction.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> I thank Peter Dula for making the association between Mary and Christina Haring. E-mail to author, Dec. 28, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald C. Studer, “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22, No. 3 (1948): 171.

That sentence from Studer's history of *Martyrs Mirror*, published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 1948, referred to the early editions, which were printed not so much in "days of affliction" as in days of prosperity in the Netherlands. The "days of affliction" more accurately described Studer's own context in the wake of World War II. Instead of pointing to the explicit teachings of Jesus, instead of saying we refrain from violence because the sword is not the way of Christ, Studer says something else. These are "stories of heroism"; tales of "courage" and of the "steadfastness" of figures like Mattheus Mair, water-boarded until death, or Christina Haring, beheaded like a man. These heroic, mythic martyr tales will inspire pacifist warriors who pledge allegiance to the Anabaptist example and follow its ethic of nonviolence at any cost.

In a similar spirit, J.C. Wenger, in a new preface to the fifth printing of the second English edition of *Martyrs Mirror*, observed that the World Wars had tested Mennonite nonviolence more than any time since the 16th century. The 1950 Cold War printing was a "vigorous effort" to win the hearts and minds of young Mennonites. In Wenger's words, "The pressures of the contemporary culture upon the group to surrender this historic [peace] principle are strong. It is evident that vigorous efforts must be made to capture the loyalty of our youth if the Biblical doctrine of nonresistance is to be preserved."<sup>26</sup>

But by 1950 that horse was already out of the stable. In 1940 the Selective Service and Training Act established favorable provisions for conscientious objectors, largely through the lobbying efforts of Quaker leaders, but also through the assistance of other historic peace churches and peace-minded groups.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, from 1940 until 1947 more American Mennonite men enlisted in some form of military service (including noncombatant assignments) than chose the conscientious objector's alternative.<sup>28</sup>

Negotiation had changed public policy, but it remained for Mennonite leaders to convince individual young men that nonresistance was an

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<sup>26</sup> J. C. Wenger, Preface to Thieleman J. van Braght, ed. *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1950), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

attractive choice. What kind of hero could compete with the glamour of fly boys with cartoon pin-ups painted on the noses of their bombers? Or, for the bookish ones, what rationale could contend with just-war arguments for personal and national sacrifice in the face of European fascism?

Enter Dirk Willems (1569), most familiar of all Anabaptist martyrs! (Some of us just call him “Dirk.”) During the dark days of Spanish rule in the Netherlands, Dirk was caught, tried, convicted, and imprisoned for being an Anabaptist. Significantly, he managed to escape from his prison in the palace, rather than accept the providence of sacrifice like Christina Haring. As he fled, he was spotted and chased by a thief catcher. Dirk ran, weightless as an angel, across a frozen body of water, but his pursuer broke through and cried for help. Dirk stopped running, turned back, drew the man from the icy water, and thereby saved his life.

In gratitude, the thief catcher argued for Dirk’s release, but upon being reminded of his oath of duty suddenly turned and recaptured the Anabaptist in a dark reversal of Dirk’s rescue. Dirk’s execution was a bungled affair, with stiff winds driving the flames away from his torso, so his shrill screams at the stake could be heard all the way to the next town. According to *Martyrs Mirror*, Dirk’s deed and execution served “an instructive example to all pious Christians of this time, and to the everlasting disgrace of the tyrannous papists.”<sup>29</sup>

Dirk Willems, indelible icon of compassion and sacrifice, pragmatist who fled persecution, good Samaritan who rescued his persecutor and thereby triumphed by means of “everlasting” shame and disgrace of the Spanish Catholics. Patron saint of the helpful and morally superior. Dirk the doer, like busy Martha, whose way the Savior did not call the better way. Dirk, who like a mule pulled a man out of the moat, and then screamed at the stake like a beast.

Oh, what would Dirk have said if we could have heard his words?

As far as I can tell with the help of Amish historian and publisher David Luthy, Dirk Willems first appeared in print outside *Martyrs Mirror* in 1940, in J. C. Wenger’s book, *Glimpses of Mennonite History*. In ’42 he turned up in John Horsch’s volume *Mennonites in Europe*. Thereafter, instances of print replication gradually increase until the 1980s and ’90s, when Dirk’s

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<sup>29</sup> *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 741.

multiplication exceeds even the birth rate of Old Order communities. It appears that the trend is holding; by 2011 Luthy, who has long tracked Dirk's appearances, counted 350 instances of the Willems image or deed in print, according to his fascinating and richly illustrated book on the topic.<sup>30</sup>

Luthy doesn't speculate about what might have caused Dirk's surge in popularity in recent years beyond noting something of a "snowball effect." We do know that Luthy inserted the Lykens engraving of Dirk onto the title page of Pathway Publishing's German *Martyrs Mirror* in 1990 (but restored the Dutch printer's mark depicting a digging Adam on a later printing). Luthy also served as an advisor for the 2002 English edition, which features Dirk Willems instead of Mattheus Mair on its dust jacket. Luthy maintains a collection of more than 400 material replications and interpretations of the engraving at the Heritage Historical Library, an Old Order Amish archive in Aylmer, Ontario.

John D. Roth, Director of the Mennonite Historical Library, launched Dirk into cyberspace in March 1995, according to Luthy's book. In the summer of 2010 my Google Image search for "Dirk Willems" resulted in more than 1,500 hits; one morning in August 2012 as I prepared this manuscript, I got 258,000 hits, including one of a Chihuahua modeling a pet tee-shirt printed with Dirk's image and name. Even admitting that some of those hits are snapshots of contemporary people, it's clear that Willems and his long arm have gained iconic status around the world. (This is all the more ironic for an Anabaptist people who trace their origins to the iconoclasm of the Swiss Reformation.)

Among the numerous contemporary renditions, I select a few representative examples.

- Dirk wears a baseball glove and fields a grounder on the cover of a 1998 Good Books title, *The Mennonite Starter Kit: A Handy Guide for the Newly Mennonite*. Not insignificantly, humor in this book comes from making explicit various details of implicit, insider knowledge kept by North American Mennonites of European heritage.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> David Luthy, *Dirk Willems: His Noble Deed Lives On* (Aylmer, ON: Heritage Historical Library, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> J. Craig Hass and Steve Nolt, *The Mennonite Starter Kit* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1998).

- Bulgarian iconographer Jivko Donkov created an Anabaptist icon of Dirk for Graber Designs of Goshen, Indiana about eight years ago. In 2007 Nancy R. Heisey, then-president of Mennonite World Conference, presented one of these icons to Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>32</sup> Handmade copies in 12" x 16" are available for a purchase price of \$450, with proceeds benefitting the iconographer, Graber Designs, and the Historical Committee of the Mennonite Church.



- At considerably less expense, Scroll Publishing of Amberson, Pennsylvania, offers color posters and post cards based on a painting by Texas artist Lee Casbeer, with the inscription, "Love your enemies and bless them that curse you."
- Dirk plays a supporting role in the 2004 motion picture *Pearl Diver*. A conservative Mennonite woman testifies at a legal hearing with the help of the engraving. The film's plot turns on a modern enactment of Dirk's dilemma in which she, as a child, must decide whether she will rescue her mother's murderer

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<sup>32</sup> After her visit to the Vatican at the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Heisey engaged in a lively debate with James Juhnke about the appropriateness of the gift, given the strong anti-Catholic rhetoric in the Willems story as recorded in *Martyrs Mirror*. She has since published an article about the experience, reflecting especially on the work of historians and the cultural significance of memory: "Remembering Dirk Willems: Memory and History in the Future of Ecumenical Relationships," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 355-75. Jivko Donkov illustration reproduced here with the kind permission of Graber Designs.

from a manure pit, or let him perish there and save her own life.<sup>33</sup>

- In 2007, Mennonite Central Committee produced “Thermostat: How Can We Turn Toward Peace in Time of Fear?” in both English and Spanish, a DVD to instruct youth on war, peace and Christian conscience, which includes the “Onward Martyrdom Rap” by Cruz Cordero:

What was Dirk thinking?  
 It was Christ on his mind.  
 What was Dirk drinking?  
 A special kind of wine,  
 instrumental for the mental,  
 giving sight to the blind,  
 a living light that shines bright  
 like the sunshine.

- During the summer of 2012, an image of Dirk’s rescue, along with a brief interpretation of the story, became the signature logo on a website designed to inform supporters and raise more than \$124,000 in legal defense funds for Ken Miller, a Beachy Amish-Mennonite minister from Stuarts Draft, Virginia. Miller was convicted of abetting international parental kidnapping in a case involving a same-sex union. He helped transport one of the former partners and her daughter, both disguised in plain dress, from the United States to Canada, and then on to Nicaragua. About 100 Beachy supporters sang hymns on the steps of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Pearl Diver*. Director Sidney King. Monterey, CA, 2006. Before making *Pearl Diver*, filmmaker Sidney King created a documentary about Clayton Kratz, who is conventionally remembered as a Mennonite martyr after his disappearance while visiting Mennonites in the Ukraine who were caught between the White and Red Armies. According to the film, based on Kratz’s letters and other archival sources, the young man volunteered for this dangerous mission because he felt conflicted about all the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives in World War I.



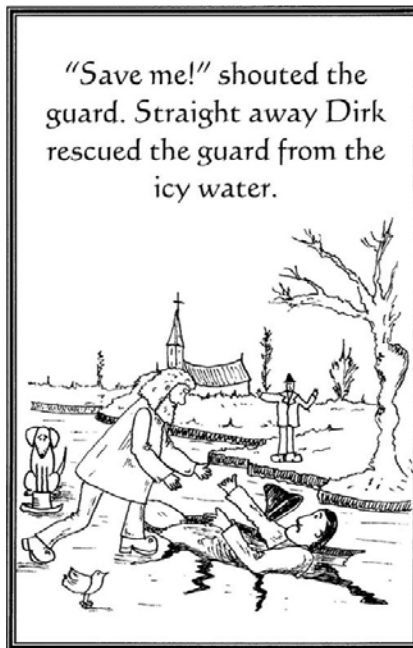
courthouse after Miller's conviction, which carries a sentence of up to three years in prison.<sup>34</sup>

- Karen Stallard, a story-teller and dramatist from East London, England, created a cartoon version of the tale, framed as “fat” jailer vs. “skinny” Dirk who follows the literal teachings of Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

On the dust jacket of the current (2002) gift edition of *Martyrs Mirror*, Dirk, who fled persecution but turned to rescue his abuser, has replaced Matteus Mair, who just said no. Dirk—spontaneous, daring and improvisational—invites New World

Mennonites to ground their identity and sense of separation from the world in brave actions. Goshen College professor of Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies Joseph Liechty has concluded that “for many modern Mennonites the *Martyrs Mirror* is effectively the story of Dirk Willems saving his persecutor's life, one of the few instances in which an Anabaptist had a chance to offer a concrete act of love to his or her enemy.”<sup>36</sup>

If this is true, the big book has collapsed into only one story and one iconic image for many readers. I worry about what gets lost in that reduction.



<sup>34</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Sect Pastor is Convicted of Assisting in Abduction,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2012: [www.nytimes.com/2012/08/15/us/pastor-kenneth-l-miller-convicted-in-parental-kidnapping-case.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/15/us/pastor-kenneth-l-miller-convicted-in-parental-kidnapping-case.html). Miller was scheduled to be sentenced in March 2013; see his web site: <http://millercase.org/>.

<sup>35</sup> Karen Stallard, *The Illustrated Story of Dirk Willems*. The Anabaptist Network (in Britain and Ireland): <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/295>. Illustration reproduced here with the kind permission of the Anabaptist Network.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Liechty, “Staying Mennonite: Why Martyrs Still Matter,” *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2007). [www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2007spring/liechty.php](http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2007spring/liechty.php)

We lose the “good witness” of strong speech, of thoughtful and articulate testimony. Instead, we get an ethic of action that is consistent with Mennonite practices through much of their North American history when quiet deeds and self-denial demonstrated faith. We get an iconic reminder of personal sacrifice and material aid, and we see that by such doing and helping, we can expect to get wrecked in the end, but this kind of death is virtuous and heroic. We lose the long letters and witty, willful court testimonies. We lose the example of those complicated manly women. Without the many stories of verbal resistance, I fear that we lose an essential check on the tendency toward acquiescence and passive submission that sometimes expresses itself as non-engagement and even anti-intellectualism in this tradition.

Of all Anabaptist martyrs, Dirk Willems is remembered not for his testimony but for his dramatic dilemma and heroic gesture. Dirk embodies both ideologies of sacrifice, early and late: classic martyrdom, by which I mean he was initially captured for being an Anabaptist, *and* the ethic of everyday self-denial, by which I mean that he abandoned self-interest to attend to the needs of another. Of course, I love the humanity of his turning on the ice when he hears the man’s cry. I love that Dirk is wide awake and immediately responsive to the material world. I love that he makes a choice. His self-denial is consistent with powerful lessons that Mennonites have been learning from martyr memory since at least 1660. But this learning should not go unexamined.<sup>37</sup>

Book of bloodshed.

Book of uplift.

Book where men are men, and women are women *and* men,  
also.

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<sup>37</sup> Dawn Ruth Nelson, former Mennonite peace worker in Ireland, found herself on service assignment without the resources to sustain her own work. She puts the problem this way: “I was inadequately prepared to look after myself, having only been schooled in self-denial.” Her book on Mennonite spirituality and cultural change connects the everyday ethic of self-sacrifice with martyr memory. She sees in the loss of traditional, located communities “a shift from a spirituality of separation from the world to a spirituality of separation from evil amid the world; from a spirituality focused on martyrdom to a spirituality of more hopeful participation in the word.” See *A Mennonite Woman: Exploring Spiritual Life and Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2010), 88.

Book to comfort orphans whose mothers died for an idea.

Book of steadfast intent and botched execution.

Book of flesh turned to text.

Book of heroic surrender and shrieks at the stake.

Picture book that teaches us actions speak louder than words.

Story that makes me wonder what writing is for.

### **Icons and Iconoclasts**

Since the 18th-century Ephrata edition, New World Mennonites have continuously printed *Martyrs Mirror* in both English and German, and many still keep it in their homes or congregational libraries.<sup>38</sup> The most conservative Anabaptist-derived groups read it the way they read the Bible, as a sacred text and a literal account of historical events. They see in the martyr stories a call to the faithful to separate themselves from the fallen world and follow the costly, narrow way. Now more than ever, James Lowery recently warned at a conference celebrating the 350th anniversary of the book's first printing of *Martyrs Mirror*, believers must heed Van Braght's warnings to the Mennonites of the Dutch Golden Age, for their sins are also the sins of contemporary North Americans.<sup>39</sup>

For more worldly Mennonites, the book exerts influence whether anyone reads it or not—and most don't. It signifies a distinct, counter-cultural identity associated with peace.<sup>40</sup> As I have shown, the publication history of *Martyrs Mirror* doesn't precisely coincide with the nation's wars,

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<sup>38</sup> The printing history of the big book is largely a New World story with two exceptions: in 1790 Amish Mennonites living in the German Palatinate printed 1,000 copies of the Ephrata translation at Primasens, and in 1853, Hansard Knollys Society printed an English edition in London, England.

<sup>39</sup> James W. Lowry, "Thieleman Jansz van Braght (1625-1664): A Preliminary Study of His Life and Thought," Plenary Session I, "*Martyrs Mirror*: Reflections across Time," Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, June 8, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> For a more detailed typology of the ways various groups read the big book, see John D. Roth, "The Significance of the Martyr Story for Contemporary Anabaptists," *Brethren Life and Thought* 37 (Spring 1992): 97-106.



and yet American Mennonites tend to rally around the big book whenever the rest of the nation rallies around the flag, in wartime, which has become all the time in this century.<sup>41</sup>

For this reason, I have come to think of *Martyrs Mirror* as an important and potent totem of Mennonite identity. Early in the last century, sociologist Emile Durkheim defined “totem” as the emblem object or animal that becomes profoundly powerful because it represents the crisis that formed the group. The totem both represents the group and protects it by sustaining its identity and keeping its boundaries. For Christians, the cross is a totem that reminds us of the sacrificed body of Jesus, the crisis that created our community. *Martyrs Mirror* includes the cross (see above image), but the big book further defines a distinct sub-group founded through the sacrificed

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<sup>41</sup> I arrived at this idea with the help of Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

bodies of the faithful who died at the hands of other Christians in the 16th and 17th centuries.

According to Durkheim, blood sacrifice gives the totemic object its power: that people have died for this set of beliefs and ideas makes them precious and worth keeping. Under totem logic, the image of Dirk's long reach would not be potent without the memory of his gruesome execution. The totem myth not only creates and sustains community but also makes its memory sacred. The *Martyrs Mirror* totem transforms a several-hundred-year history of disordered violence and migration into a rational series of human sacrifices that engendered the group. It defines the boundaries of the group, constructs the ideology that sustains identity, and—most alarmingly—demands additional sacrifices to keep the group's identity strong.

One might think more about the totemic function of *Martyrs Mirror*, especially the cost of maintaining the totemic myth in places where literal martyrdom no longer threatens the faithful. Have Mennonites, a people committed to nonviolence, embedded an identity in the necessity of certain kinds of violence, including not only persecution and martyrdom but also exclusions, refusals, and dismissals of others in order to keep the community strong? Is esteem for martyr heroes much different from esteem for military heroes?

Certainly we are not alone in this fascination with costly sacrifice. In her last project, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, Grace Jantzen, the late philosopher of religion who was born into a Mennonite Brethren community in Saskatchewan, observed that an obsession with death dominates the Western imagination from Homeric times to the present. This culture of necrophilia is manifest in a culture's turning from the pursuit of beauty and newness and life to a focus on violence, war, and a preoccupation with worlds other than this one.<sup>42</sup> Borrowing a strategy from Jantzen, I'd like to ask what would happen if we shifted the emphasis just a bit. Certainly, people died testifying for these beliefs, but is it not also true that they also chose and *lived* for them? I wonder whether death must give the totemic book its mythic power.

Considering what I know of my own family history from the 150 years of European persecution, I have reason to believe that more Swiss

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<sup>42</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Anabaptists fled, hid in caves, promised to remain banished away in France but instead returned to their cows and wives in the mountains anyway, snuck around, lied, tricked the authorities, or emigrated up the Rhine, across the Atlantic, or east into Poland—than ever faced an executioner. Death and fear of it may drive the militarized state, but a belief in the resurrection of the body emboldened the earliest Christian martyrs to resist empire and speak their good witness defiantly, right there in the arena. I can only guess that a desire for life, and even prosperity, drove my ancestors to flee European persecution and make perilous journeys across the sea, and, once in the New World, to clear land, cross mountains, and cleave to beloved farmsteads.

What if we claimed survival—even flourishing—as the fortunate inheritance of New World Mennonites? How would things change if, instead of asking our children, “What are you willing to die for?” We asked them, “What are you willing to live for?” Or, “what new, beautiful and just thing can you conceive here and now in this New World?”

Book of remembrance more potent than weapons.

Book of obsession and repetition.

Book of blood and beginnings.

Book that shows us what bodies are for.

Book forever saying who we are.

Book that instructs us to speak up.

### **Afterword**

A few years ago when Kirsten Beachy set out to gather pieces for *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, a collection of contemporary writing engaged with *Martyrs Mirror*, she was surprised to find it quite easy to compile an anthology; in fact, some pieces had to be turned away.<sup>43</sup> Whether the result of the popularized forms of Anabaptist history and identity—such as the film *The Radicals*—or the consequence of sobering post-9/11 reconsiderations of martyrdom,

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<sup>43</sup> Kirsten Beachy, *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010).

many Mennonite writers have come to grapple with the big book. Some of the pieces in Beachy's collection are earnest, but most are gently ironic or frankly irreverent, the work of people born after the Cold War who may be more interested in tugging at the corners of cultural memory than revisiting the suffering of historical heroes. These poems, and stories, and essays belong to a growing body of artistic responses to *Martyrs Mirror*, the work of writers and visual artists from Mennonite and other Anabaptist traditions who have grown up with the big book somewhere in their peripheral vision, and who are finding imaginative and intellectual ways to respond to it.

I count this essay among those efforts. It has been in the works for a long time, drafted during a residency at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University and presented in a quite different form as a public lecture in April 2007 titled "Mirror of the Martyrs: *The Martyrs Mirror* (Thieleman J. van Braght, 1660) and its American Legacy." This work was part of a larger project, still in progress and supported by The Fetzer Institute, that I called *Sacrificial Figures* and described as a book-length collection of essays that will explore the historical, cultural, and personal meanings of sacrifice, especially as it is embodied in the roles of mother, martyr, and soldier.

In June 2010, after a week of work at the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen, Indiana, I presented another version of this paper at *Martyrs Mirror: Reflections Across Time*, a conference at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. A still later version I offered as the Rod and Lorna Sawatsky Visiting Scholar at Conrad Grebel University College in February 2012, and again as part of the Justice Lectures at Eastern Mennonite University in November 2012. I am deeply grateful for these opportunities and audiences, which have helped to advance my thinking.

The length of time it has taken me to find even slightly different ways of thinking about the martyr legacy—ways that always seem obvious when I finally arrive at them—I take to be an indication of how deeply the martyr memory rests, whole, in collective and individual consciousness. Although I have not cited it in this text, my thoughts were also encouraged by Stephanie

Krehbiel's 2006 essay, "Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior," the nerve it hit, and the controversy it inspired in *Mennonite Life*.<sup>44</sup> May the conversation continue.

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### **RODNEY AND LORNA SAWATSKY VISITING SCHOLAR LECTURE**

The Sawatsky Visiting Scholar Lecture was established in 2004 to honor Rod Sawatsky's leadership at Conrad Grebel University College, where he served as faculty member, Academic Dean (1974-89), and President (1989-94), and Lorna Sawatsky's many contributions to the College. Visiting Scholars are scholars, practitioners, and artists who have made a significant contribution in their field, reflect an ecumenical spirit, build bridges and foster reconciliation, and embody the complementary relationship between the College and the Church that is at the heart of the College's identity and mission. While on campus they teach classes, offer workshops, interact with faculty and students, and present a public Lecture. Visiting Scholars have included Ron Mathies, Reginald Bibby, Royden Loewen, Mary Oyer, Pakisa Tshimika, and Donald Kraybill.

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<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, "Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior," *Mennonite Life* 61, no. 4 (December 2006). See also the response by Melvin Goering in that issue and numerous responses in the subsequent issue, *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2007): [www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/](http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/).



## **An Expected Openness<sup>1</sup>: Testifying Against James K.A. Smith's *Thinking in Tongues*<sup>2</sup>**

*David C.L. Driedger*

As an eighteen-year-old I became increasingly involved with a group of Christians for both existential and hormonal reasons. I was living in a small town in the distinctly Mennonite notch of the Bible belt on the Canadian prairies, and a few of the folks in this crowd attended church in a nearby community. We decided to go to an evening service there one Friday night. It was a youth event, with an extended period of upbeat praise and worship followed by a time of prayer. When the leader asked if anyone needed prayer, I remember feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. I took that to be a sign from God, so I stood and walked forward. The man asked if I had ever been *baptized in the Holy Spirit*. I did not understand that phrase, but I had not been baptized at all, so I said no.

I was brought to a separate room where two young men joined me. I knew one of the men, and the other was outfitted in second-hand fatigues and a bandana. He projected a look that said *you don't want to know what I've seen*. They showed me verses about speaking in tongues and then asked whether I wanted to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. After I agreed, they laid their hands on me, assuring me not to worry, *even if things feel strange or sound dumb*. As they began to pray, their sentences seemed to break apart into individual words, each with its own emotional resonance and significance. Their tempo increased, and the words ceased to resemble English until they fell into a perceptible rhythm of phonetic sounds. Interspersed into this rhythm were plain English words encouraging me to join in. I concentrated and created a few sounds that I thought were not words. My companions responded. *Yes! Thank-you Jesus! Lamma shabbah sachnee sabatoo—*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Andrew David for his editorial input in helping to develop the style and content of this article.

<sup>2</sup> All bracketed references refer to James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Having assembled a few short nonsensical bits of sound, I stopped speaking and noticed my arms tingling. Both of them slowly went numb up to my shoulders. I found myself rolling around on the floor, laughing. We all laughed together for a good five or ten minutes. It felt good. They told me I could now go home and speak in tongues whenever I wanted.

I went home and tried it. It did not work.

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As a young adult, I was taken by a friend to a small coffee shop called The Stone Table in Vancouver, British Columbia. Two musicians played solo that night, Damien Jurado and David Bazan. I can't remember a single lyric from the evening, only an image of Bazan sitting with his acoustic guitar, his head tilted back so all I could see was his unshaven neck. And from that posture he wailed.

That night left an impression on me. Something in the pacing, the congruence of body and emotion and tone, something in the glacial pressure of the whole pushed through the simplistic boundaries of how I understood Christian expression. They sang about God and without God. It was as though, God forbid, the whole world was somehow full of God's glory—and as though the inverse were also true, that the whole church was full of sin. With some pretensions of being a radical Christian, I welcomed the continued work of these artists as they stretched the church's notion of faith and life. I anticipated each new album, and then, when it was in hand, I would sit alone in my dorm room absorbed in the experience.

Over the years, Bazan, in particular, continued to push the boundaries. In time I found that I was not pushing alongside him but he was pushing me and my boundaries. I became confused. Was he *for* the church or *against* it? Was he *inside* or *outside*? And finally I encountered the track "Foregone Conclusions." The song unveils the mechanics of a Christian mind in conversation with non-Christians, the futility of argumentation, and the hard-heartedness and resolve of an unwinnable war over the soul. The song climaxes by accusing the Christian of being so preoccupied in trying to talk about Jesus that it becomes impossible to hear the Spirit "begging you to shut the fuck up." And with that, my mind hit pause. I saw the crossroads. I felt

the bind I was put in. Meanwhile, Bazan was reading the minds of his good Christian listeners who were left wondering whether his voice was now the “voice of the devil” because we “don’t believe [God] talks that way.” Bazan sang on, leaving me behind. Who now could arbitrate, mediate, confirm the voice of God?

\* \* \*

We gather Easter Sunday in the often ridiculed North End of Hamilton, Ontario. The little church-slash-community-center is located in the middle of a neighborhood covered by thin layers of filth that have settled over the decades from the steel mills lining Lake Ontario. The gathering is small, perhaps fifteen or twenty of us in total. The demographics are simple: dogooders who had intentionally moved into the neighborhood and people who had nowhere else they could afford to move to. On the walls hang simply constructed banners from years past—a felt boulder being rolled away from a felt tomb with yellow felt rays of light beaming from the felt darkness. The air carries the sounds of worship music led and played by nonprofessionals. The lead guitarist struggles to keep time as a woman, physically and mentally handicapped from a car accident, shakes a tambourine to her own particular rhythm. A sightless man reads Braille and tells of Jesus miraculously healing the blind. The pastor leans against the wall and talks with us for a few minutes about gratitude. After the service, we offer warm and warming smiles to one another, and leave with no discernible change.

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I began this review essay with personal testimonies. Following James K.A. Smith in *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy*, I offered them without context, allowing them to stand on their own so they might form a sort of “irreducible” contribution for understanding a belief structure or worldview (xxiii). They were to linger, strike, or fail on their own accord. As I develop my position below, I will give them more context, because it is in the realm of testimonies that the integrity and validity of Smith’s arguments ultimately hang.

The stated goal of *Thinking in Tongues* is to promote the agenda of a distinctively pentecostal approach to philosophy (151). In doing so, the author acknowledges that what he offers is a sketch, even a “cartoon” (xxv). However, rather than an astute sketch that demarcates key relationships and clarifies issues with simplicity and exaggeration, Smith’s cartoon ends up looking more like mascot for a minor league team trying to turn pro. Until now the image of the team (pentecostalism) has been flat, predictable, and poorly fitted in its costume. But with his cheering, Smith transforms what appeared shabby into something gritty, and then backs his revitalized mascot with a host of dazzling and sexy European cheerleaders that have boosted other dominant teams of philosophy. For this reason, I suspect the book may well feel like a VIP pass to philosophy’s Big Show for young pentecostal-minded (spirited?) students, though how it will be met by larger audiences is less clear.

To be fair, Smith does subtitle his first chapter, “Advice to Pentecostal Philosophers.” There is no question as to his intended target audience. It is in the remaining chapters where he elaborates his paradigm and offers preliminary engagements within various fields of philosophy. After advocating for the place of pentecostal philosophers, the author builds up his argument. Chapter two demonstrates how the practices of pentecostal spirituality reflect an openness to the surprise of God that can destabilize entrenched traditions and patterns of thought. This leads to a particular epistemology outlined in chapter three that is not grounded in disembodied Reason but is developed contextually within the narrative framework of scripture and testimony (or worship more broadly). Chapter four engages modern science and suggests an alternative to the traditional debate between naturalism and supernaturalism. In the final two chapters Smith tests out his paradigm. He presents a critique of the philosophy of religion in chapter five, calling on this discipline to pay more attention to the practices of religion. Then in chapter six he offers a contribution to the philosophy of language, using glossolalia as a test case.

The basic framework for this project is set forth early on (summarized on page 12). Smith begins with a postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, characterizing the Enlightenment as establishing a foundational and objective rationality by which all truth can be evaluated. He argues that

strands of contemporary and postmodern philosophy have come to see that, contrary to this perspective, we humans function with a prior affective posture toward the world that conditions how we think and reason. We are constituted by prior formations and beliefs (e.g., a worldview or spirituality) before we engage with philosophical ideas. This critique is important for two reasons.

First, Smith takes the relationship between beliefs and rationality as an admittance ticket for pentecostals to the philosophical conversation: “The crucial implication here is a certain levelling of the playing field: if everyone operates on the basis of a worldview, and all worldviews have a basically confessional status, then a specifically Christian or pentecostal worldview has as much right to come to the scholarly table as any other” (29). Second, framing the conversation in this manner, as a postmodern philosophical critique, flows into Smith’s prospective project for a pentecostal contribution to philosophy.

I want to focus on what I consider key to this project, namely the question of whether or not a pentecostal spirituality offers a “radically open” engagement with the world (epistemologically and ontologically). This openness forms the centerpiece of Smith’s view of pentecostalism (33), and our response to Smith’s overall contribution will likely be determined by how we interpret this claim.

Epistemologically, this openness emphasizes an affective form of knowledge, a knowledge that is prior to objective reason and is formed ritually, bodily, and narratively. In this way, personal testimonies, the laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, kneeling at the altar, emotive music, and hand raising all create layers that reflexively mould an orientation toward the world. It is these modes that create new possibilities prior to and outside the parameters of Enlightenment reason. Ontologically, this openness points toward an enchanted understanding of the material world. Smith hesitates to speak of supernaturalism, a term suggesting a dichotomy between the natural and the divine that he does not feel represents a pentecostal worldview. Instead, in broad alignment with Radical Orthodoxy, he regards the entire material world as sustained and infused by God’s Spirit; as such, it remains ready for the surprising and creative work of our participating with God. This is what Smith calls a noninterventionist view: “A ‘miracle’ is not

an event that ‘breaks’ any ‘laws’ of nature, since nature does not have such a reified character; rather, a miracle is a manifestation of the Spirit’s presence that is ‘out of the ordinary’ (referred to as ‘sped-up’ or more ‘intense’ in another context); but even the ordinary is a manifestation of the Spirit’s presence” (105; parenthesis added).

These claims to openness deserve to be evaluated on their own terms. In critiquing Smith’s philosophical contribution, I will focus on the affective practices and particular testimonies (narratives) that shape the pentecostal worldview (xxiii, 31). Each chapter of *Thinking in Tongues* begins with a vignette of pentecostal spirituality. I appreciate the risk of including these accounts, as many other ecclesial-minded theologies are sparse if not barren when it comes to the actual testimony of church members. However, what I find surprising is the complete lack of paradox or irony in Smith’s accounts of pentecostal openness. His examples of a radically open spirituality come off as a confirmation of the caricature I already have of pentecostal worship. There are boisterous musical numbers, informal church structures, sentimental testimonies, and tearful altar calls. The only real hint of irony appears when Smith says that for pentecostals “the unexpected is expected” (33). I am not denigrating these expressions or this mode of worship, but I am criticizing the notion that these forms reflect a unique mode of openness to the world. I could have written similar accounts of Pentecostal worship without ever having attended the particular churches he refers to. What Smith testifies to as internal expressions of surprise are already accounted for and anticipated by external experiences with this tradition.

Smith does acknowledge at several points that pentecostals are not immune to abusing their practices, but nowhere does he reflect on the possibility that pentecostalism’s forms are scripted in a way that has little more internal variance than a Catholic Mass or virtually any other liturgy. Moreover, I suggest that the felt need for the unexpected lends itself to a much more coercive environment than many other traditions (as I describe in my own experience of being open to speaking in tongues). But more than the predictability of pentecostal worship, I argue that Smith nowhere entertains the sort of conflict and crisis of openness that David Bazan created in me through “Foregone Conclusions.” What if the Lord is speaking to me in a form I implicitly reject? The sort of structured practice of the “unexpected”

that Smith gives account of may actually keep people from the openness represented in the biblical account. What would happen if someone told the worship band in full swing, or the teary woman in mid-confession, that God was telling them, *à la* Bazan, to shut the fuck up?

One of the testimonies Smith offers is of a woman who could not conceive a child (49-50). She wanted to be a Hannah, a barren woman who miraculously conceives through petitioning God (see 1 Samuel 1), but the Lord did not seem to be listening. She even became angry with the Lord. But now this woman is pregnant, and so she is a Hannah. Yes, we should be happy for her, but theologically this is not a unique account of entering God's openness. Against Smith's interpretation, I am not convinced that this is an instance of being situated in the biblical narrative (51), because to be situated in that narrative is also to have a radical break with the narrative. To be a Hannah *within* the Bible is seen in Luke's gospel, where we find the shift from the desired pregnancy of Elizabeth in old age (a traditional Hannah) to the unexpected and unsought pregnancy of the single teenage Mary. It is Mary, not Elizabeth, who is a Hannah. The biblical precedent, then, is an open and unforeseen possibility in the present. Openness is repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense, which assumes and demands a difference. This repetition can also be seen in the patristic understanding that Jesus' ministry is a repetition of Joshua's conquest.

It is the complete lack of irony or paradox that ultimately keeps Smith's project from gaining traction. I am not suggesting that there are never occurrences of openness or repetition in pentecostalism, only that I don't see pentecostalism as being particularly unique in this case. This is the point of my final witness, the portrayal of Easter worship in a small run-down church in Ontario. There was nothing particularly *pentecostal* in that account, no discernible "working of the Spirit." It was, however, as best as I can interpret the event, an intensification of God's work. It left an indelible mark upon me that both connects and breaks with what was prior and what might possibly come. In this way, it may be better to speak of the "fugitivity" of the Spirit, to borrow from Peter Dula,<sup>3</sup> than to speak about

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Dula, "Fugitive Ecclesia," in *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*, ed. Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 105-29. I refer to this account because of its emphasis on acknowledging how God does or does not

how to “structure” for openness as Smith does.

If there is, however, an open structure, it is more likely to be found in Liberation Theology than in pentecostalism (or most other confessional approaches, for that matter). I am not saying that pentecostalism and Liberation Theology are incompatible. In fact, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s framework of beginning from a “pre-understanding”<sup>4</sup> seems to share some similarities with Smith’s affective or bodily approach. However, I maintain that Liberation Theology is better equipped to speak of openness because of its posture toward the powers of the world, which demands an ongoing reorientation outside of internal interests.

Although Smith makes several insightful observations relating strands of contemporary philosophy with pentecostal spirituality, the whole project is plagued by the specter of his mascot. As he cheers on would-be pentecostal philosophers, there is no irony in the prescribed forms that are to create openness, and there are too many references to the “staid” (a favorite term in the book) academic community and how it would have a hard time handling the “raucous” and “gritty” pentecostals. I am all for the promotion of more rigorous and diverse forms of thought and expression in the church, but the notion of enforcing the rights of pentecostalism to some elite academic table does not seem likely to bear good fruit. Don’t worry about the mascot, just play the game.

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appear to be working at times in the life of the church. This sort of acknowledgement is missing in Smith’s account.

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Cardid Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 3-4.



Sharon L. Baker and Michael Hardin, *Peace Be with You: Christ's Benediction amid Violent Empires* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, and Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2010)

A reader might do well to read the fourteen essays on Christian peacemaking in this volume one by one, with time to digest and ruminate after each entrée. Food for thought and action in these pages represents a wide spectrum of approaches and perspectives, mostly within a neo-Anabaptist frame of reference. Styles vary from accessible/popular to esoteric/academic.

Brian McClaren, for example, serves the first course with an approachable essay on “preemptive peacemaking.” He says Jesus calls us to “go beyond cleaning up the disasters of war once they happen and instead to invest our best energies in preventing war, genocide, and injustice from happening in the first place.” Derek Alan Woodward-Lehman, in stylistic contrast, calls on “white Christians to place themselves under the tutelage of nonwhite ecclesial communities whose *aversive* modernity is resistant to the white supremacy of *European* modernity.”

The book grew out of a conference at Messiah College sponsored by Preaching Peace. Conference organizers and co-editors Michael Hardin and Sharon L. Baker say the purpose of the event was to “find a synergy that dealt with what Christianity without violence would look like.” With allusions to John Howard Yoder and other Anabaptist lights, conference presenters and authors speak from their respective perches in homiletics, philosophy, ethics, theology, and biblical studies. The result is a rich array of approaches to peacemaking without much cross-fertilization or synthesis. Readers do not benefit much from the pushback and debate that presumably ensued between the presenters.

The book nevertheless makes a substantial addition to the peace shelf of any pastor, student, theologian, or ethicist. Pastor James F.S. Amstutz describes the struggle and joy of a congregation trying to let God's *shalom* permeate mission in a local community. Peacemaking-as-mission takes him and his congregation into a district courtroom to stand with an economically and socially vulnerable neighbor at risk of eviction. Author and teacher Richard T. Hughes laments that Christian leaders too often have been “fervent advocates of violence and war.” Citing Franklin Graham and Tim

LaHaye as counter-examples to his own view, he says future church leaders need to abandon ideologies that merge faith with nationalism and “embrace instead both the idea and the rhetoric of the kingdom of God.”

Bible scholar Reta Halteman Finger suggests that the number *twelve* for Jesus’ core group of disciples was a “deliberate political act of resistance against Rome” because it symbolized restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. Alluding to the current health care crisis in the United States, she notes how acts of physical healing by Jesus often redressed deleterious effects of the Roman Empire. She observes that he applied nonviolent resistance to economic injustice by cleansing the temple, and was viewed by the Romans who killed him as a political subversive. Historic Peace Churches, she contends, have experienced so much cultural assimilation that they risk losing the peacemaking message at the heart of the gospel.

Andy Alexis-Baker dismantles the comfortable truce many modern Anabaptists have made with policing in state and society. Policing frequently is corrupt or oppressive, he declares. Giving moral support to local or international police actions is “likely to make Christian pacifists into just war theorists under a different name.” He even remonstrates against what he sees as the police-approving stance of the Mennonite Central Committee Peace Theology Project.

Addressing conflict from a pastoral perspective, Presbyterian Jean F. Risley draws on René Girard’s work to show how scapegoating can do damage in a faith community. Dealing with such unhealthy conflict may require leaders to “introduce and model truth-telling about the reality that the community is experiencing.” There will always be conflict in the church, she avers, but if handled well it can lead to growth and mutual love in a congregation.

Behind all these essays lurk the twin dragons of (American) empire and Constantinianism, realities with which Anabaptists in the West today must deal. While making no attempt to integrate the many strands of argument in the thirteen other essays, Sharon Baker provides three essential keys to peacemaking in the kingdom of God: (1) *love* of God, neighbor, self, enemies; (2) *forgiveness* which ends retributive justice; and (3) *reconciliation* which redeems our past and restores our future. She then points to an indispensable element of Anabaptist peacemaking: the body of Christ.

Through the church we are reconciled to God and to one another, and become ambassadors of God's healing presence in the world. That is good biblical and Anabaptist ecclesiology.

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Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer, eds. *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Nonviolence*. The Peaceable Kingdom Series 1. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012.

*A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* is the kind of book every pacifist has thought of writing—perhaps after a frustrating conversation with a non-pacifist colleague, family member, or fellow congregant. As the editors state, its goal is to “answer the questions that many of us [pacifists] are often asked in a way that is accessible to anyone curious as to why this form of Christian discipleship may be at the heart of following Jesus” (8), which sometimes involves “complicat[ing] things a bit” (3). Thus, each of the thirteen chapters—not including a foreword by Stanley Hauerwas, an introduction by the editors, a conclusion by Tripp York, and an afterword by Shane Claiborne—address common questions about Christian nonviolence, often querying the assumptions behind the questions.

Hauerwas's foreword, it should be noted, raises another question: To what extent should *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* be read as an extension of John Howard Yoder's work? Outside the foreword, Yoder is mentioned only occasionally, but he seems to lurk behind several arguments. At the same time, some authors take a decidedly non-Yoderian approach. Nevertheless, Hauerwas is probably correct that “Yoder would have read this book appreciatively” (ix).

Chapters 1–6 focus on practical questions and chapters 7–13 on biblical questions. C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell begins by asking whether pacifism is passive; then follow chapters on protecting third party innocents by D. Stephen Long, and on the classic “What would you do . . . ?” question

by Amy Laura Hall and Kara Slade. Robert Brimlow addresses “What about Hitler?”<sup>1</sup> Gerald Schlabach and Bronson Barringer discuss, respectively, whether pacifists must reject the police force and how pacifists should respond to those who fought for their freedom.

Gregory Boyd offers a transitional chapter that asks whether God expects nations to be nonviolent—a matter of practical import that he answers with solid biblical exegesis. The final six chapters discuss biblical interpretation more directly: the Old Testament by Ingrid Lilly; Romans 13 by Lee Camp; Matthew 10:34–39 (Jesus bringing a sword, not peace) by Samuel Wells; Matthew 8:5–13 (the faith of the centurion) by Andy Alexis-Baker; Gospel accounts of Jesus’ dramatic action in the Temple by John Dear; and the warrior Jesus in Revelation 19 by J. Nelson Kraybill. By way of conclusion, York describes how Christianity, while not worth fighting for, is certainly worth dying for.

The book’s main flaw is the editors’ decision not to begin “with a chapter arguing for something called Christian nonviolence” (6). Rather than accepting the burden of proof, they assume that Jesus’ teaching and example entails nonviolence—so long as the biblical objections dealt with in chapters 7–13 do not override it. But this very assumption is what many will dispute. The book should at least include a chapter on whether Jesus’ instructions regarding nonviolence cover more than merely interpersonal relationships. Otherwise, why not accept Calvinism’s “sphere sovereignty” or Lutheranism’s “two kingdoms”? Granted, a number of authors do venture into this territory, but this unfortunately leads to unnecessary repetition, making the book slightly longer than it should be.

Who, in fact, is *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*’s intended audience? Is it possible to write a book for “anyone” (xi, 8)? Numerous chapters assume a commitment to scriptural authority, so is this book primarily for evangelically-oriented readers? If so, that audience may be disappointed with the radical historical-critical method of Lilly and (perhaps less so) Dear. Moreover, some chapters seem geared toward non-pacifist readers; others (e.g., Brimlow, 45) seem geared toward readers already committed to nonviolence; and a couple, where Schlabach and Alexis-Baker continue

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. his book of the same title: Robert W. Brimlow, *What about Hitler? Wrestling with Jesus’s Call to Nonviolence in an Evil World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006).

their ongoing debate over policing, seem written for an intramural audience.

The book appears best suited for pacifists looking to bolster their responses to standard questions, just warriors wanting to read current scholarship on pacifism, fairly well-educated persons interested in the topics, or small groups led by someone who has already studied the issues at length. It is a helpful compendium, an invaluable resource for Christian pacifists looking to explain their faith to those not yet committed to Christian nonviolence. One thing *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* will not do, however, is to serve as a silver bullet (so to speak) allowing pacifists to circumvent frustrating conversations with non-pacifist interlocutors.

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Darrin W. Snyder Belousek. *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

*Atonement, Justice and Peace* is a considerable contribution to scholarship on atonement theory. Clearly written and systematic in its presentation, the work is exhaustive in its treatment of the various theories of atonement and frequently anticipates and addresses possible counterarguments. As a result the book itself is quite large, but not in such a way that the potential reader should be intimidated, especially given its accessible presentation and vocabulary. The author, Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, teaches at Ohio Northern University and has served with the Mennonite Mission Network. His research interests range from the topic of the present book to the philosophy of science, and to American politics.

While the book contributes to the larger discourse of atonement theology, it is also possible to locate it among a smaller emerging discourse that seeks to situate atonement theology in relation to Anabaptist teachings on nonviolence and pacifism. In many ways *Atonement, Justice, and Peace* argues for a nonviolence that is not only manifest in concrete practices such as pacifist resistance to war, but also in our way of thinking and theorizing

regarding Christ's death on the cross as well as his resurrection.

The book is organized into four sections: "Rethinking the Message of the Cross," "The Cross, Atonement, and Substitution," "The Cross, Justice, and Peace," and "The Cross and Mission." Throughout the work Snyder Belousek develops what he calls a "Cruciform Paradigm" that stands opposed to the dominant "Retributive Paradigm" that theories of atonement so often conform to. The first section outlines the motive and methodology for the whole work, and prepares the way for the second section, which addresses the doctrine of penal substitution, which is then examined in the third section by means of the priorities of justice and peace. The final section serves as a summary of the Cruciform Paradigm and offers some perspective on the work's possible contribution to mission.

While the most of *Atonement, Justice, and Peace* is concerned with theological discourse, there is a vital philosophical sensibility that underlies the work's methodology and approach (noticeable in the references to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Thomas Kuhn). Snyder Belousek writes that the role of the philosopher in the church is to "exercise and sharpen our critical awareness of the framework of presuppositions within which we make sense of both Word and World" (xi). The presupposition that comes to mind, given the focus of the book, is that there is a retributive core to the atonement, and a God whose so-called 'justice' must be satisfied by the death of Christ. While the author is critical of these presuppositions, he gives each theory of atonement due consideration within the context of the tension between God's will for justice and God's will for peace. The work takes this critical spirit and implements it against the foundation of the retributive paradigm: the economy of exchange, which both positively and negatively returns like with like, or "evil for evil, harm for harm [and] good for good, value for value" (26). But, as mentioned above, rather than dismissing exchange economy as necessarily sinful, the author is quick to clarify that "the exchange of value for value can contribute to the common good of human society" while still being "an inadequate model for understanding covenant justice" (27).

These clarifications, as well as Snyder Belousek's commitment to reasoned argument and attention to both scripture and canonical texts in contemporary and historical theology, make it difficult to find a flaw in his

interpretations or conclusions. The work would lend itself well to a study on atonement in an upper-year university course, perhaps alongside works with a similar theme such as J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* (a book which is addressed at the end of the first section in a coda entitled "The Cross, Atonement, and Nonviolence").

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Alan Soffin. *Rethinking Religion: Beyond Scientism, Theism, and Philosophic Doubt*. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011; John Suk. *Not Sure: A Pastor's Journey from Faith to Doubt*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

Those enthralled with the intellectual life like to think that we follow the evidence, that we seek truth for its own reward. Both Jon Suk and Alan Soffin are comfortable enough in their own minds to admit that the circumstances of their lives have affected their quest for understanding. Suk's *Not Sure* and Soffin's *Rethinking Religion* are exercises in sense-making. Suk's confidence in the Reformed tradition, his ecclesial home since his youth, was eroded by exposure to other traditions, years serving as a lightning rod—pastor and editor of a denominational publication—and travel to parts of the world where humanity's frailty and viciousness are less shielded by wealth. The thought lines of Soffin's book serve as the *coup de grâce* to a scientific naturalist perspective the author once held. For Soffin the struggle was prompted by the premature death of a spouse and subsequent passing of friends.

Readers will sense the respective authors' attempts to assess the significance of their lives. Both writers look back on views they previously held, in some cases views predicated by institutional location and culture, and forward towards some sort of individual actualization (or social fragmentation). But to say these books are biographically driven would be a disservice, for neither can be fairly reduced to brooding melodrama and neither is without substantive intellectual reflection. The two volumes are quite different: Suk's a spiritual memoir and a narration of the place of faith

in Western culture, Soffin's a work of analytical philosophy optimistically intended for a general readership.

*Rethinking Religion* is a tightly linked argument extended over almost 400 pages. The author beckons readers from the far side of a river, asking them to step from one rock to the next, each easy enough, until, whether they intended to or not, they stand at his shoulder, "religion" rethought. The arc of this book is polemical scattershot, though its thesis is clear. As its full title suggests, it seeks to move beyond the unworkable approaches of scientism and traditional theism. Soffin also abhors skepticism but uses it to demonstrate the miraculous character of knowing: to be human is to possess something philosophically inexplicable—knowledge. As material beings, noetic humanity represents a hypostatic union of another order. The moment humans possess knowledge rendered as meaning is the instant the world comes to be, for creation is a foil, albeit one destined to be rethought. The far bank, then, is religion reconstructed: a land where God is the way things are and God's substance is necessity. For all the linear logic and rationalist assumptions, it is "a love and respect for the substance of things," an attitude Soffin finds common to both "Confucian and Native American" perspectives, that serves as the book's concluding note (381).

Suk's *Not Sure* is a two-paneled tableau. On one panel is sketched the author's spiritual journey. Suk stretches the borders to include his pre-modern ancestors, modern theological formation, postmodern fellow graduate students, and his recent experience of the allure of the web. He aims to show the genealogy of his own destabilization and the origins of his doubt, and to etch a line of connection to the second panel, where he attempts to describe the major periods of Western culture and the meaning of each for faith. The narrative is marked by references to communication theory and the effects of technological development on popular spirituality. The result is Western history divided into several epochs: oral, literate, postmodern, and the present, described as a return to orality. Each panel is laid out in installments. Most of the first four chapters are hinged together in this way. The final chapters explore faith in the present tense. Suk concludes that faith is the act of keeping on, even when one is unsure the path still leads anywhere.

One delightful thing about both books is their skewering of silly but



popular theological notions. Suk, for instance, takes pleasure in pointing out the obtuseness of the idea that being a Christian is mostly about having a “personal relationship with Jesus.” More painfully he shakes up common views on prayer, and makes it clear that many Christian denominations are preoccupied with self-preservation. For his part, Soffin attacks the idea that theists can defend God’s existence by affirming human incompetence to grapple with big questions under the guise of championing “faith.” More perceptively he contends against several iterations of the ontological argument.

Ironically, most Mennonite readers may identify more with Suk’s book, published by a press with roots in Reformed soil, than with Soffin’s volume, championed by Cascadia. Mennonite institutions have had little time for philosophy, and the modern, comprehensive ambition of *Rethinking Religion* will do little to change that. But Mennonite readers of Suk’s *Not Sure* will find much that is familiar, such as an ethnic/cultural church worried about assimilation and struggling to keep its youth. They will know from experience the predictable in-house conversations, church politics, and trophy-making of the idiosyncratic convert that Suk describes.

Neither book, however, should be recommended uncritically. The early chapters of *Not Sure* read as though two book ideas were combined as an austerity measure. Suk’s cultural history is at its best when discussing technology and literature. It is markedly weaker when trying to explain the relationship between elite intellectual trends and downmarket cultural realities: see the hazardous use of the term “postmodern.” Also, inane phrases like “rocks my world” should not have leaked into the published volume (4).

Though the writing in *Rethinking Religion* is remarkably clear for the genre, few will want to attempt crossing so much rough water in one volume. The author’s argument would have benefited by avoiding the term “religion” altogether. It is rarely clear what it refers to, and this vagueness allows Soffin to avoid dealing substantively with any religious tradition. It is no surprise, then, that his resulting argument tips in favor of the secular. The term “theism” is similarly unhelpful. The author seems to think it can encompass all traditions that affirm creation and deny the eternality of matter. In these ways the essentialist strains of this form of argumentation are obvious. For example, even though Soffin surely means to include

Christianity in his analysis, even relatively unschooled believers would reject their way of life being described as a “religion.” Those trained in theology know that the drama of Christian doctrine is not centrally about creation. Early theologians fingered the issue to insert distance between themselves and the Platonists, but it is not the dramatic heart of Christianity. That title belongs to re-creation. In addition, the inclusion of a superficial sixth chapter called “Responses” undercuts the seriousness of Soffin’s work: the three contributors scholars are unclear about their assignment and fail to engage Soffin’s philosophical analysis. The fault may lie with an editorial decision to turn a monograph into a prosaic dialogue.

Doubt and the reconceptualization of religion are topics with a certain currency today. In this light both these books make a contribution. However, for younger readers educated outside parochial institutions and immersed in a wider culture awash in doubt and rethinking, the pathos driving these two volumes bespeaks the struggles of a previous generation.

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Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld. *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011.

Violence. Peace. There may be no more pressing issue in our times than violence, no greater need for our world than peace. Accordingly, there may be no matter of greater relevance for the church than learning to interpret violence in the Bible as we strive to live the gospel of peace as a light to the nations. Hence the urgency and import of Tom Yoder Neufeld’s fine new book.

There would seem to be no sharper opposites than violence and peace. Yet, as Yoder Neufeld observes, the New Testament confronts us with violence in the very creation of peace. On the cross, Jesus “murders hostility”

even as he himself is murdered; and it is Jesus' own act of "killing enmity" that creates peace between former enemies and reconciles these formerly hostile parties to God (Eph. 2:11-22). Such "crossing" of violence and peace is troubling. Does God make peace by violence? How many ways could we misread this text? Yoder Neufeld aims to bring us face-to-face with violence in the NT and, far from flinching, to help us read troubling texts having significant theological and ethical implications.

This volume covers a wide range of challenging issues: Jesus' teachings on loving enemies and forgiving offenders; Jesus' action to clear the temple and his death on the cross; Paul's teaching of subordination to civic and domestic authorities; and divine warfare in final judgment. In each chapter, Yoder Neufeld takes "core samples" from representative texts for close examination, allowing him to study selections with nuance and depth.

When addressing a troubling text, the author first brings into view the violence in the text that we might otherwise miss. We might miss it because the text has become domesticated by familiarity. Thus, we are so used to citing "love your enemies" that we might forget that doing so in ancient times could easily have left oneself vulnerable to violence. We might also miss the violence in the text because it is associated with social structures to which we have become accommodated. So, if we unconsciously identify with the social role of a free male, we might neglect the potential victimization of a woman or slave exhorted to "be subordinate" to her husband or master. Once we have faced the violence in the text, we need to ask: Does the text valorize violence, or might it subvert violence? Does it validate the victimizer, or might it empower a potential victim?

By recovering the historical circumstances surrounding the text and listening to contemporary critics of the text, Yoder Neufeld puts front and center the identity and location of the reader. Who is reading the text and from what vantage point? This question opens the text to multiple readings, particularly those that might challenge traditions claiming a biblical basis for justifying violence. At the same time, this can destabilize the text and weaken its authority. While giving a fair hearing to diverse voices, including feminist criticism and the hermeneutics of suspicion, the author wisely does not allow any one voice to silence the text or set the agenda. He consciously reads the text as Scripture, an "incarnational" word from God, even as he

acknowledges its historical embeddedness. His book is thus an excellent example of wrestling with the text in both faith and humility.

One scholarly contribution that I appreciate especially for its practical implication is the extent to which Yoder Neufeld recovers the wisdom tradition of Israel as a formative background of both Jesus' ethic and Paul's teaching. Citing the Wisdom of Solomon (from the Apocrypha) at several points, he shows how Jesus' ethic of non-retaliation and Paul's teaching of subordination rely on trust in "a just and merciful God whose reign will be asserted in the end" (35). Wisdom's counsel that we entrust judgment, both vengeance and vindication, to God requires of us patience and hope, spiritual virtues sorely needed in a violent world.

While engaging critically with current scholarship, Yoder Neufeld has written a book that is accessible and useful to lay readers. It would make a good complement to Patricia M. McDonald, *God and Violence: Biblical Resources for Living in a Small World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2004), which focuses mostly on the Old Testament. Together they would comprise an ample basis for an edifying study that could be undertaken in congregations, colleges or seminaries.

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Linda Huebert Hecht. *Women in Early Austrian Anabaptism: Their Days, Their Stories*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2009.

A welcome addition to the growing scholarship on the lives of women in early modern Europe, this work follows in the same vein as *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (1996), a collection of essays Linda Huebert Hecht edited with C. Arnold Snyder. *Profiles* introduced a new wave of scholarship that includes work from Hecht, Snyder, Mary C. Sprunger, Marion Kobelt-Groch, and others. Here, the author eschews martyrological literature and focuses on court records from the *Quellen zur*

*Geschichte der Täufer XIII Band Österreich II. Teil.* of 1972, edited by Grete Mecenseffy, a pioneer in Anabaptist studies.

Hecht explores the lives of Anabaptist women in the territory of Tirol between 1527 and 1531. These women, she notes, were not exceptional figures like the Strasbourg prophetess Ursula Jost, or Barbara Rebstock, or even the martyrs dramatized in the *Martyrs Mirror*. They were, however, faced with circumstances that forced them into action. Utilizing Max Weber's routinization thesis, she finds far more female leaders among these Anabaptists than Claus-Peter Clasen did in his social history from 1972, thus offering an important revision of older narratives. Many Anabaptist women left their children to follow their faith; evidence from their contemporaries indicates this was a particularly problematic issue.

Hecht examines the common assumption among interrogators that females were "simple-minded"—and how Anabaptist women could take advantage of it. She deals with the threat and use of torture, recantations and relapses, the treatment and special concerns of pregnant women, and other matters addressed in court documents. She also follows the persecutory strategies of the authorities, whose commitment to hunting Anabaptists ebbed and flowed depending on political expedience and mandates in different areas.

The book's treasures lie in the details of the author's narrative and in the records behind them. For example, she offers an account of an unnamed Anabaptist woman whom the authorities (falsely) believed may have baptized 800 new believers and carried a register of baptisms (101-102). She writes of maids and servants, rich and poor women, wives of leaders and single women, widows and pregnant women, all of whom made difficult choices to join or leave the movement. She follows their stories as far as the evidence allows, produces a detailed picture of what it was like to live as Anabaptist women in Tirol during the period, and masterfully articulates how these women negotiated their lives under persecution.

Hecht succeeds in sharing the concerns of early Austrian Anabaptist women despite how the material is presented and organized. For example, she points to a database she created to log her study of the women in court records, and she introduces a rubric to understand female involvement in the Anabaptist movement: Believers, Martyrs, Lay Missioners and Leaders,

and Indirect Participants. But these categories clearly warrant more than the half paragraph of explanation (11). Using these categories, she lists 419 women in an “Index of Women’s Names” (253-66). Yet aside from providing generalizations in her introduction about the relative involvement of married and single women, she leaves the reader to organize and analyze the numbers of women in each category. A summary chart or graph would have been far more helpful than a 14-page index.

Moreover, Hecht’s laudable choice to include translations at the end of every “Introduction to ...” chapter is marred by her desire to make the “stories more complete” by putting translations in italics and additional information in “block letters” (16). While this paratextual strategy may be helpful to some readers, it made the reading cumbersome for me.

Finally, I am critical of the conclusion to this otherwise excellent book, as the epilogue ends on a devotional note that undercuts the nuances of the historical analysis. In the final section, “The Legacy of Anabaptist Women,” the author asks, “What do the stories of Anabaptist women mean for us today?” (215). She contends that the women in her narrative were all leaders in the broadest sense of the term. For her, leadership is the ability to “influence other people” (presumably in a positive way) and applies to contemporary and future Anabaptist women as well. This meaningless definition does a grave disservice to an otherwise solid historical work. Instead of emphasizing the diversity of the hard choices and decisions made by Anabaptist women in the past, Hecht caricatures all early modern Anabaptist women as heroic leaders of the faith in order to support her theological vision about women in the Peace Church tradition today. In light of her “Indirect Participants” category and her accounts of recantations and hard decisions, the rest of the book argues for a far more realistic perspective on those early modern women.

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Jeremy M. Bergen. *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts*. London: T & T Clark, 2011.

“I’m sorry.” These are two simple words that we (hopefully) give and receive on a regular basis. Realizing that we have sinned, owning up to our error, and asking forgiveness is basic to the Christian faith. Saying we are sorry is even enshrined in worship and liturgy, albeit in rather more ceremonial language. For the most part, we make these expressions of repentance and requests for forgiveness as individuals. But what is the case when the church as a whole needs to repent and seek forgiveness? This is the subject of Jeremy Bergen’s *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts*.

The fact that expressions of repentance for past sins have become more and more common in the last few decades belies the complex nature of such acts for Christian doctrine and practice. “Given that churches are repenting of the actions of generations long past, in what ways, if any, are such actions meaningful?” asks the author. “In what sense is a penitent twenty-first century Catholic Church the same church as the thirteenth-century one? Does whatever ties the present Catholic Church has with the crusades also tie the present day Mennonite churches, for example, with the crusades?” (156).

As a development of Bergen’s doctoral dissertation, *Ecclesial Repentance* requires a level of theological literacy on the reader’s part. The first half of the book is a socio-theological investigation of contemporary expressions of repentance from various church traditions on such matters as disunity, colonialism, war, and personal injustice. While this does set the stage for the doctrinal framework in the second half of the book, there seems to be a significant disconnect between the two parts.

To make sense of ecclesial repentance from a doctrinal perspective, Bergen draws from Robert Jenson’s future-oriented ecclesiology to envision the church primarily as a communion of saints rooted in the eschatological life of the Triune God. When contemporary churches repent of wrongs committed long ago, they testify that the church—past, present, and future—is bound together in Christ, the Living Head. Historical wrongs are thus claimed as part of the self-identity of the whole church as the Spirit brings the church to repentance.

The goal of this repentance is to bring about a healing of memories between the two parties. This requires a dialogue, where a penitential reading of history overcomes the separation created by sin, allowing the two memories of the past sins to become one. It must also be done eucharistically, by which Bergen means that “the church must find itself fully dependent on—that is, in the real presence of—the forgiveness that Christ makes possible through his death and resurrection; in repentance the church declares its intention to do so. However, to the extent that divisions exist at the Lord’s Table, the church is not yet in the presence of the forgiveness it needs. It does not manifest the unity proper to it, and its memories have not been healed and reconciled” (195).

One of the strengths of Bergen’s proposal is that his ecclesiology is not primarily institutional. This allows his understanding of ecclesial repentance to apply as much to the confession for the sack of Constantinople by the Roman Catholic Church as to the confession of their animosity towards other ecclesial traditions by the Mennonite churches. The connection between the church past, present, and future is a challenge for non-episcopal churches, which tend to reject those unsavory events in church history as acts of the fallen church. Bergen reveals this approach to be a cop-out. Rejecting sinful acts as the acts of a “fallen” church creates a schism that is just as real as the schism between contemporary ecclesial traditions.

An added benefit of this approach, although mentioned only briefly by the author, is the opening it creates for ecumenical dialogue. If the unity of the church can be maintained through time, even when the shared history of the church includes the persecution of members of one tradition by another, it can likewise be maintained through space—that is, as a starting point for separate ecclesial traditions to come together and create both a reconciliation of memories and a reconciliation of future hope.

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Chris Huebner and Tripp York, eds. *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010.

One virtue of this fine collection of essays is displayed in the frank dualism of morals expressed by John Milbank in his foreword. He contrasts “ideological purity” with “expediciencies of power,” suggesting that the great question of Christianity and politics boils down to a choice between a Dostoevskian Eastern Orthodox monastic purity refusing any ecclesial compromise with coercive worldly power and a Latin Augustinianism seeking to make good use of the compromised earthly city, including its coercive power. Once again Anabaptists seem to have succeeded in stripping away the veil of rhetorical convention over the biblical meaning of the power of weakness.

Yet Milbank deduces from his interlocutors “that modern Mennonites would tend to say that they offer, *not* the path of misguided purism, not the illusion of ‘beautiful souls,’ but rather their own middle way between apoliticism and political compromise” (xiii). This is a welcome complication of the Mennonite position by a mainstream Anglican theologian, even if it might also be more generously applied to the entire radical reformation. Predictably, this is not enough for Milbank, who, like Niebuhr and all other mainstream orthodox reformers, insists that “the survival of Christianity was enabled by acts of military defiance and its survival otherwise would have been either marginal or non-existent—the religious pluralism of the American polity being nowhere yet in sight” (xvi). With this, he puts his Mennonite interlocutors back into their place, praising them for bearing witness to the radicality of messianic peace but making them rely upon more worldly and nuanced incarnational theologians like himself to work out the necessary compromises allowing such radicality to survive politically and religiously in the *saeculum* “between the times.” Fortunately, the book makes its own case on quite other terms.

I highly recommend this thoughtful, provocative, and most interesting collection of essays to a range of readers: students, professors, pastors, and ethically engaged citizens of both Augustine’s cities. Radical Orthodoxy (RO) and the Radical Reformation (RR) have much to learn from mutually critical provocations, and these essays explore new frontiers in political theology, particularly on violence and pacifism, and on forgiveness and

patience, which are read in a more complex ecclesio-political context than older church-state dualisms allow.

Peter Blum questions both RO and RR positions on the impossibility of nonviolence through a creative reading of Derrida's essay on forgiveness, showing that a "no" to violence inhabits a different moral economy (hence a different "ontology") than does ideological (or perfectionist pacifist) nonviolence. Kevin Derksen deconstructs Milbank's account of violence as rooted in a kind of self-possession (and self-knowledge) that makes an ethic of self-sacrifice nonsensical and that is due to a division between theology and ethics which Milbank generally eschews. Tripp York contrasts the Anabaptist apocalyptic Christ and Milbank's "tragic-ridden ecclesiology" (52), suggesting that the former must resist the historical necessitarianism of the latter. Rosalee Velloso Ewell argues that RO fails to come to terms with the particularity of scriptural narrative but then reduces this to identity politics and the "historical particularity of Israel" rather than the "figural" particularity of poetic, prophetic singularity—the latter (despite its being, e.g., Benjamin's and Rosenzweig's approach) is deemed "marcionite." Craig Hovey argues against this kind of historicism to suggest that Christian witnesses must bear testimony to the Christ event "in the present tense" (101), that is, figurally, rather than reduce such witness to developing grand historical RO metanarratives.

Dula inaugurates the second half of the volume with a substantial essay on "Fugitive Ecclesia" (trading on Wolin's "Fugitive Democracy" that so influenced Hauerwas, Coles, and Stout) that nicely complicates the relationship between Christianity and democracy by developing a more robust ecclesiology, showing why the church is not a pure ideal and why it is a bad idea for the church to have recourse to authoritarian (mainline) models of leadership. This opens the door to discussions about fugitive intimacy (no discussions of nonviolence without addressing the question of desire!). Stephen Long shows his RO credentials by insisting on the distinction between natural and supernatural desire, and engages a fascinating comparative discussion of von Balthasar, Barth, and Girard before ending, dialectically, with Milbank. Cheryl Pauls takes up the metaphor of *harmonia* in RO rhetoric, showing with considerable musical sophistication the theoretical and practical interpenetration of theology and aesthetics in

liturgical expression, and arguing for an improvisational “harmony in exile” (169) over against the classical idealism of RO (Pickstockian) liturgics. Harry Huebner helpfully brings Milbank and Yoder into dialogue on the complex relations between violence, peace, and forgiveness, showing what is at stake when one takes Pauline rather than medieval theological accounts of “participation” as primary—a revealing point as pertains to historicism. Finally, Chris Huebner’s capstone essay considers what RO and RR might learn from one another, and recommends an ongoing risky radicality that embodies critical and dialogical vulnerability, in keeping with the power of weakness that refuses to make the world safe—since that is not a human prerogative.

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Paul Martens and Jenny Howell, eds. *John Howard Yoder: Spiritual Writings*. Modern Spiritual Masters Series. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011.

Before it is a social strategy, nonviolence is a moral commitment; before it is a moral commitment, it is a distinctive spirituality. It presupposes and fosters a distinctive way of seeing oneself and one’s neighbor under God. That “way of seeing” is more like a prayer than it is like a shrewd social strategy, although it is both. It is more a faith than a theory, although it is both. (23)

Paul Martens and Jenny Howell use the above quotation from John Howard Yoder’s *Nonviolence: A Brief History* to frame their collection of excerpts from the renowned 20th-century Mennonite theologian’s writings. It defines the distinctly Yoderian spirituality and theological logic explored in their volume, an impressively concise distillation of Yoder’s corpus of writings. Beginning with a brief biography and an overview of Yoder’s contributions to academy and church, Martens and Howell organize their selections into four major sections, each of which is introduced by the editors.

The first section, “The Meaning of Jesus,” touches on Yoder’s biblical

hermeneutics, the centrality of Jesus Christ as a historical, Jewish, and political Messiah, and Yoder's articulation of the Anabaptist life of faith, with its basis in communal discipleship. "The Mandate of the Church" delves further into Yoder's understanding of the church as, to mix his metaphors, a "foretaste" of the kingdom of God, which the church makes "visible" in human history (66-67). This section also includes examples of his engagement with other Christian denominations and their divergent understandings of the church, as well as with the Jewish tradition. Section three, "A Cosmic Vision," looks at differences between the church and the world, as determined by the confession of Christ as Lord and the witness of the life of nonviolent action in the world. "Practices and Practical Considerations," the fourth and final section, contains Yoder's insights on the practice of nonviolence, addressing concerns of responsibility toward the nation, social justice, and effectiveness. Yoder argues that Christians are not primarily to be concerned with avoiding sin or the alteration of society, but by obedience to Jesus' way of peace (142-43). For Yoder, the church is the body that, through the Holy Spirit, provides the virtues and skills necessary to fulfill this calling (150-51).

By and large, the book is skillfully edited. The introductions to each major section are insightful and helpful. Also, though Yoder's life was controversial on several levels, Martens and Howell laud him for his accomplishments as a ground-breaking theologian, yet do not avoid mentioning the failures within his personal and family life. To their credit, they treat these events with both sensitivity and honesty, thus providing a balanced portrait of Yoder that is neither one-sidedly saintly nor flawed. Of the four sections of excerpts, the final two stand out in that they go beyond the more familiar arguments of *The Politics of Jesus* and into Yoder's later work, including his takes on the "preferential option for the poor" in Latin American liberation theology (167-69) and the nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi (148-49).

That said, more attention could have been paid to the different contexts in which Yoder wrote his various books; excerpts from his earliest writings at times appear beside those from much later works. Granted, he is known for his almost rigid consistency; nevertheless, some developments and changes in emphasis occurred over the course of his career. Instances of such shifts are his addressing of questions of gender equality (147) and

ecological concerns (152-53), as well as liberation theology, as mentioned above. Lengthier excerpts on these topics would have been appropriate. The omission of the original footnotes also makes navigating the excerpts challenging at times, since the thinkers and events Yoder makes reference to are not cited or explained. Interested readers must consult the original texts for this sort of information.

Overall, the book is a solid introduction to the major themes of Yoder's thought, and would be useful for adult education classes, small church groups, students, or individuals wanting a taste of this remarkable theological voice. My guess is that these excerpts will prove to readers why Yoder's interdisciplinary articulation of Mennonite peace theology has so profoundly influenced not only fellow Mennonites but also those beyond Mennonite circles, through his years of preaching the spirituality of peace in both church and academy.

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Bryant L. Myers. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Revised and expanded. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.

Well written, well researched, well argued, easy to read and understand, Bryant Myers's *Walking with the Poor* is an excellent resource for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of development values and practice from an unabashedly Christian perspective. This book argues strongly and repeatedly that poverty is not a "material condition having to do with the absence of things like money, water, food, housing and the lack of just social systems . . . materially defined and understood" (5).

With this perspective, Myers takes issue with the currently dominant paradigm that assumes poverty is material and consequently often separates the spiritual world from the material. The result of this common—and in Myers's thinking, misguided—approach is a development focus primarily

on increasing access to the physical necessities of life. In contrast, Myers contends “that the nature of poverty is fundamentally relational and that its cause is fundamentally spiritual. The poor are poor largely because they live in networks of relationships that do not work for their well-being. . . . Poverty is the whole family of our relationships that are not all they can be” (15).

Building on this premise, the author traces how Western and traditional cultures often differ on the role and appropriateness of religion as an integral part of development. Rather than the clear division advanced by most Western perspectives between the material and the spiritual, or between the seen and unseen, traditional cultures often blur these lines and recognize an intermediate world that blends the two. Myers then explains the harmful impact of development practice that separates the spiritual from the material, and articulates the importance of Christian development practitioners being able to deepen their theological skills “just as they develop their technical skills” (47) in order to work with this middle ground.

Myers posits that the key to transformational development is recognition of the role of “God’s redemptive and restorative work in the world” (176). The problem with traditional development that does not take the spiritual into consideration is that it reinforces the poverty trap in which the poor find themselves. When development interveners from their position of power emphasize the material at the expense of the spiritual, they foist their “god complexes” on the poor, thereby reinforcing the exclusion of the poor as actors in their own development story, and they intensify the lack of value that the poor often feel. When this happens, the poor “no longer know who they are (being) nor do they believe that they have vocation or gifts of any value (doing). . . . [T]heir poverty is complete” (128, 130).

After making a compelling case that eradicating poverty requires a spiritual diagnosis and response, Myers discusses program design and evaluation that will better enable Christian development workers carrying out holistic development to be truly effective in eradicating poverty. His discussion is full of helpful examples illustrating transformative practice. The stories he tells are inspiring and illuminating. Although acknowledging the witness of an imperfect church, he finds great hope in the church’s Christian witness and reminds readers that the church will be present “long

after the development intervention is over” (191), thereby ensuring that interventions done in partnership with indigenous Christian communities will have staying power and lasting impact.

While an excellent overview of Christian development practice, this book raises several troubling questions. First, other than to suggest to the poor and non-poor that they need to accept Myers’s Christian perspective to free themselves from the clutches of poverty, it seems to offer limited hope to people who remain committed to a contrary faith system. The book would be strengthened by a fuller explanation of how those not sharing the author’s religious beliefs fit within his paradigm. Are they always condemned to a life of poverty? How would the author engage in theological discussions with persons from non-Christian traditions?

Second, this volume gives short shrift to a rights-based approach to development, which is more fully infused into contemporary practice than the author acknowledges, and which could complement aspects of his own approach. Lastly, I was most surprised by Appendix 3: Standards and Indicators for Christian Witness (359), in which technical competence is never mentioned. Christian development workers could be substantially technically incompetent, yet fully meet virtually every indicator as long as they possess the requisite religious attributes. It seems to me that competence ought to be emphasized as an important foundational element of Christian witness.

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Amos Yong. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

In this book Amos Yong offers a biblical rationale for fully including and deeply valuing people with disabilities within faith communities. In a book he describes as intended for lay readers (6), he examines biblical support

for his conviction that people with disabilities must be central in the life of the church. In the process, he considers able-bodied biases in biblical interpretation that he believes have reinforced discrimination against people with disabilities. Bringing together the insights of biblical scholars who have written about disability, Yong adds fresh insights of his own about biblical passages one might not have thought about in a disability context. The outcome is a significant contribution to biblical interpretation on disability, disappointing only because it does not live up to the author's intention to be accessible to the average layperson.

Yong begins by deliberately setting aside the interpretive framework that he calls the "normate" worldview, the pre-understandings readers in Western society have typically brought to reading the Bible through able-bodied privilege. He examines texts that have traditionally cast stigma on people with disabilities, arguing that the stigma comes not from the texts themselves but from able-bodied bias that misconstrues their meaning.

The author advocates a fundamental shift in point of view that shapes the book and stands on three explicit assumptions: that people with disabilities are created in God's image, that they have lives of their own and must not be defined solely by their disabilities, and that "disabilities are not necessarily evil or blemishes to be eliminated" (13). Any interpretation of a biblical text that conflicts with these assumptions he rejects as coming from the normate worldview. He then reexamines the potentially stigmatizing text and offers an alternative, disability-affirming interpretation.

Following this pattern, he examines selected texts from the Hebrew Bible, Gospels, Pauline epistles, and eschatological writings through the disability lens. In considering the Hebrew Bible, Yong suggests narratives about characters with disabling conditions as counterbalance to more troublesome passages that associate disability with sin. He goes on to examine the disability implications of healing stories in Acts and the Gospels of Luke and John, Paul's theology of weakness, and eschatological images of disability throughout the New Testament.

Yong takes it for granted that our understandings of the Bible depend on the context from which we read, an approach some readers might find unsettling. Some might argue that he has skipped a necessary step of providing biblical justification for his foundational assumptions. He argues



instead that the normative worldview has been such a powerful shaper of the context in which we read the Bible that a strong suspicion of traditional understandings is both necessary and reasonable.

Biblical understandings of disability that are congruent with the experience of people who live with disabilities are crucial if churches are to fully include and value these people. Yong makes a significant contribution to this effort, drawing together in one place the work of many scholars and augmenting it with insightful original interpretation.

In my view, the book does not achieve the author's stated aim of writing for a lay readership. His specialized vocabulary and dense prose would be daunting to many educated lay Bible study groups or Sunday school classes. This is disappointing, because, as Yong rightly suggests, a book on this theme that is understandable to the average layperson is sorely needed. Still, the book deserves a place in academic curricula for persons preparing for church leadership, especially those who preach or provide pastoral care. In the hands of a skilled teacher who can translate the concepts into simpler language, it could provide an excellent foundation for a serious Bible study about disability. Thought-provoking questions at the end of each chapter augment its usefulness for teaching.

It is time for churches to rethink what they have long assumed the Bible says about disability, interpretations that have inadvertently added to the burden of people with disabilities. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* is a serious call to the church to give up biblical interpretations that soothe the theological sensibilities of the able-bodied at the expense of leaving people with disabilities stuck with images of God that do not serve them. I hope that church leaders and others will take up the challenge to render this book's important message into language accessible for the average churchgoer, not just those with graduate degrees.

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Paul G. Doersken and Karl Koop, eds. *The Church Made Strange for the Nations: Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011.

The fifteen essays in this volume are remarkably coherent. They all address the question, as the editors say in their introduction, of how “the church’s peculiar and strange locatedness” affects the form of its corporate witness, particularly in the political sphere (vii). To put it in more familiar terms, they reflect on what it means for the church to be “in but not of the world.” That question, of course, has always been at the heart of Mennonite theology. Yet these essays also cohere around an unexpected answer. Instead of a more traditional Mennonite emphasis on the church as a model of alternative ethical practice, they argue that the church’s “strangeness” is disruptive, paradoxical, and mysterious—even mystical.

A church whose difference consists only in nonconformist traditions or institutions is simply “not strange enough,” as Chris Huebner says (152). What marks the church as truly strange, rather, is its willingness to relinquish mastery over the world and even over itself. Though the essays vary widely in subject and style, they almost all agree in this: the church should give up trying to control history or political institutions (Alain Epp Weaver, J. Alexander Sider, Arnold Neufeld-Fast), its own practices or structures (P. Travis Kroeker, Joseph Wiebe, Irma Fast Dueck, Cheryl Pauls, Chris K. Huebner), or its fundamental identity (Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, Jane Barter Moulaison). As Travis Kroeker puts it, “the church is not called to point to itself, its structures, its teachings, its traditions, but rather to bear sacrificial witness to the passage of God in the world that is ever passing away” (93). Giving up control means opening ourselves to the surprising, unsettling guidance of the Spirit.

Under the influence of John Howard Yoder, the refusal to take the reins of history has become a commonplace in recent Mennonite theology. Yet these authors have radicalized that refusal and made it the core of Christian witness. Yoder meant it primarily as undergirding a commitment to nonviolence: Christians should not try to force things to come out our way, but entrust ourselves to the way of Jesus. These authors mean much more than that. Joseph Wiebe, for example, argues through a reading

of Sophocles' *Antigone* that even the attempt to maintain a consistent community ethic will "reproduce Creon's control of humanity" (110). He prefers Antigone's faithful lament, which disrupts all tradition. At the end of his essay, Wiebe even disrupts his own admiration of Antigone. Holding onto any kind of stability, even the stable practice of lament or self-critique, means abandoning the church's strangeness.

There is much to commend this recent turn. It undermines the temptation to put too much faith in an institutional or traditional identity, or in a cultural common sense—a lesson the volume's two main dissenters from this overall trend, A. James Reimer and Waldemar Janzen, would have done well to heed. But the relentless focus on disruption and paradox means that, though ostensibly discussing politics and church life, the authors rarely come anywhere near a concrete proposal for action. Alain Epp Weaver's essay on a theology of exile—one of the volume's best—does finally advocate a "binational future of mutuality in Israel-Palestine" (33), and Helmut Harder's commentary on recent Mennonite-Catholic dialogue recommends an ecumenical peacebuilding effort. In both cases, attention to a usually-unacknowledged figure (the refugee for Weaver, the Catholic for Harder) gives rise to a surprising but recognizable call to action. In that, however, they are unfortunately the exception. In its attempt to unsettle Mennonite communities and traditions, Mennonite theology cannot give up its traditional concern for clear and active witness in the world.

As an edited collection, the volume is excellent. However, the closing essay by Stanley Hauerwas did not, in my opinion, fit the book's tenor or purpose; and the categories the editors used to divide the essays in their introduction were not particularly illuminating. But those are minor complaints. While the authors are in conversation with each other as academic theologians, many also write in a style that is accessible to students. (Sheila Klassen-Wiebe's essay on the Johannine meaning of being "in but not of the world" would be especially useful in the classroom.) And the volume itself ably demonstrates the wide influence of Harry Huebner, the Canadian Mennonite theologian in whose honor it was published, while pushing the boundaries of constructive theological work.

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*The Conrad Grebel Review* is an interdisciplinary journal of Christian inquiry devoted to thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective. Published three times a year, each issue usually contains refereed scholarly articles, responses to articles, informal reflections and essays, and book reviews. occasionally publishes conference proceedings as well. Submissions are sought which, in subject and approach, will be accessible and of interest to specialists and general readers.

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Articles are original works of scholarship engaged in conversation with the relevant disciplinary literature, and written in a lively style appealing to the educated, non-specialist reader. Articles must be properly referenced, using endnotes, and should not exceed 7,500 words. The Review follows the Chicago Manual of Style.

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Reflections are thoughtful and/or provocative pieces that draw on expertise and experience. These submissions may be homilies, speeches, or topical essays, for instance. Manuscripts should be about 3,000 words.

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