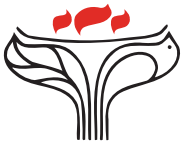


# THE CONRAD GREBEL REVIEW



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# The Conrad Grebel Review

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## Foreword

With this issue we announce several changes to *The Conrad Grebel Review*. Most important, we would like to acknowledge a number of personnel transitions. First, we welcome Kyle Gingerich Hiebert (kyle.gingerichhiebert@utoronto), Director of the Toronto Mennonite Centre, as CGR's new Book Review Editor. We thank Troy Osborne, now Dean of Conrad Grebel University College, for serving in this capacity since 2015. Second, we welcome Bekah Smoot-Enns (renns@uwaterloo.ca) into the role of Circulation Manager while Kim Penner is on leave.

With this issue we also welcome a new group of Consulting Editors who will offer valuable expertise and wise counsel to CGR as they begin a five-year term. As we do so, we also thank those who continue in this role and especially those who have now completed their terms.

With this issue we also introduce a slight stylistic change to the CGR, by including brief (100-word) Abstracts above individual articles. This change reflects our ongoing effort to enhance CGR's effectiveness and reach, particularly since most of our readers now access our articles individually on-line.

As always, we invite submissions of articles or reflections, brief responses to published articles, and suggestions for books to review, in keeping with CGR's mandate.

*W. Derek Suderman*  
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*Stephen A. Jones*  
Managing Editor

# **Human Flourishing and Chronic Suffering in the Body of Christ: The Aching Beauty of Vulnerable Communion**

*Erin Dufault-Hunter*

## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, academics as well as popular writers have explored the concept of “flourishing” and encouraged individuals to pursue their own thriving. This essay argues that Christians cannot know what flourishing means apart from attention to those among them who are chronically ill and suffering. Juxtaposing stories of persons with debilitating illness with biblical texts offers a way to interpret flourishing from within the Christian tradition. Received as gifts, the chronically ill press Christians to temper concepts of flourishing, to hold temptations to cheap thriving in check, and to connect with one another in mutually vulnerable communion.

A friend of mine has a daughter with a neurological disorder that if untreated can cause victims to go mad or drive them to suicide. A medication that mitigates some of the severity of the condition must be administered at regular intervals, so that neither parents nor child ever sleep for more than three or four hours at time. This is just one of the many life-disrupting, often physically difficult and painful aspects of managing narcolepsy—for one who has it and for those who care for them. As with other families who daily deal with acute disorders or medical needs, the impact of this illness on a daughter, marriage, professions, friendships, and family members can hardly be overstated. At an Easter meal together, a psychology colleague lauded “thriving,” an area that she researches and lectures about as a psychologist. Shocking the table with her vehemence, my friend whose daughter has narcolepsy exclaimed, “I am so sick of ‘thriving’! And if I hear ‘flourishing’ again at my church, I am going to explode. Whatever does this mean for my life, for our family’s life?”<sup>1</sup> The uncomfortable silence that followed is a

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<sup>1</sup> For details about the unrelenting toll narcolepsy can take on caregivers, families, and those who have the condition, see Claire Crisp, *Waking Mathilda: A Memoir of Childhood Narcolepsy* *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 4-27.

common response when those who suffer chronic conditions openly dare to challenge conceptions of well-being and the implicit imperative to pursue it as God's intention and our true or authentic end.

Mirroring its popularity in secular contexts and in academic fields such as positive psychology, many Christian institutions and churches utilize the language of “human flourishing” to describe their mission.<sup>2</sup> Most secular and Christian perspectives on flourishing and thriving acknowledge that a robust understanding of this concept must account for the role of, or simply the existence of, human suffering. Martin Seligman (the father of positive psychology who self-identifies as temperamentally prone to depression) defines flourishing as having the following elements, in ascending order of importance: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.<sup>3</sup> Seligman is interested in interventions, shifting psychology to focus not on what is wrong but rather on what makes life worthwhile, including for those who lack what the Greeks called “moral luck.”<sup>4</sup>

Many fail to experience such luck, including luck with their physical health. Approximately half of all adults in the United States have chronic health conditions, not to mention the many children who suffer from such conditions.<sup>5</sup> The mother in the anecdote above responded to summaries of thriving that, for example, depict it as the coalescing of “enjoyment and meaning in life's endeavors,” because what this requires seems out of her reach. She expected other *Christians* in particular to be sensitive to this, to

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(Palace Gate Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (New York: Atria, 2012). For an example of how prominent Christian institutions employ this construct, see Yale Center for Faith and Life, “God and Human Flourishing Project.”

<sup>3</sup> Corey Keyes and Jonathan Haidt, eds. *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Well-lived Life* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), 6. Positive psychology and thriving literature often utilize the concept of authenticity and its relationship to achievement.

<sup>4</sup> The Greeks and many current philosophers believe that fate could make a good life unattainable. See for example Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001). The Greeks wrestled with what participation in the good meant for various persons when not everyone is dealt the same or equitable hands by fate.

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Chronic Disease and Health Promotion,” <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/overview/>, accessed November 14, 2016.

speak and act about flourishing in ways that attend to the pain, loss, and exhaustion that marks much of daily life in her household and in many others like hers.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than enhancing and freeing people for a good life, the language of flourishing can silence truthfulness about the toll chronic illnesses can extract from those with these conditions and from their caregivers. However, it is not only those directly touched by illness who benefit from a critical evaluation of flourishing. In their eagerness to pursue thriving as an avenue for cultural relevance, Christians may forget that this concept must be tamed and trained by their particular tradition. Pursuing the self-care and authenticity that thriving may promote, some distance themselves from those whose presence covertly undermines (attainable, straightforward) flourishing from those whose embodied reality whispers the tenuousness of ability and health. Thus, absent a rich conception of thriving possible amid suffering, a Christian risks severing herself from the good that is the joining with others in Christ's broken, fragile body—regardless of her own capacity or health.

Others, including those writing disability theology, have offered descriptions of flourishing amid suffering.<sup>7</sup> This present essay addresses peculiarities faced by Christians who do not wish to be in pain or who find their impairment not merely a matter of bodily difference or distinction but (at least at times) a condition or pain which they themselves dislike and from which they seek relief. The concern here is not with thriving as someone with Down syndrome or other condition labeled “disability.”<sup>8</sup> I am not only

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<sup>6</sup> Keyes and Haidt, *Flourishing*, 94.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), chapters 2 and 3; Shane Clifton, *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2018), “Introduction: A Disabled Account of Flourishing.”

<sup>8</sup> Much disability theology takes issue with such labeling and adopts the social model of disability, drawing attention to ways society blocks access to resources and relationship to entire categories of persons. Others note that “disability” masks all humans’ interdependence. See for example Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996); Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), especially chapter 3.



naming the isolation noted in a social model of disability or claiming that chronic illness is primarily a problem of how people with certain bodies are treated.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I claim that Christians cannot know what flourishing means apart from attention to those who are chronically ill and suffering. Juxtaposing stories of persons with illness with biblical texts is one way to “re-mean” chronic suffering and flourishing from within the Christian tradition and explore its contours without lapsing into abstraction.<sup>10</sup> Through these narratives, I will explore how chronically ill persons and their experiences press all Christians to temper concepts of flourishing, hold temptations to cheap thriving in check, and determinedly connect with one another as a living testimony to a good life made possible in the vulnerable and mysterious communion of Christ’s wounded and risen body.<sup>11</sup>

I will begin by considering how prayer, a seemingly caring response to these conditions, can morph into a means by which the worries of the well end in shame for the suffering. Next I will consider how the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ inform alternative habits for genuine communion with one another amid suffering. Then I examine a double-healing in the Gospel of Mark, re-imagining our lives from its horizon. Finally, I consider the audaciousness of a God who obligates those enduring suffering to attend to others as a condition of their participation in the good life.

### **“Are you better?” Praying for the Chronically Ill**

Suzy was managing a multi-million dollar trust for a world-renowned

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<sup>9</sup> In the social model of disability, disability is not an issue of an impairment of an individual but rather an issue caused by the problematic ways society is organized to prevent certain persons from being fully included in communal life. For a description of the social model of disability as distinct from others, see Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 19. This sort of exclusion is examined below in the context of Christian practices aiming to “include” the chronically ill.

<sup>10</sup> In similar fashion, theologians such as John Swinton take on embodied conditions that seem to challenge theological claims and squeeze them for insights that clarify or revise them. See for example John Swinton, “Reflections on Autistic Love: What Does Love Look Like?” in *Practical Theology* 5:3 (2011): 259-78. As James McClendon claims, “*Biography at its best will be theology*” (emphasis in original). See James McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 22.

<sup>11</sup> See Swinton, “Reflections on Autistic Love,” 259-78.

organization.<sup>12</sup> By age thirty, she had found incredible success and joy in her work. But through a series of events, her health—and life as she had known it—unraveled. An assault left her with long-term injuries and, while hospitalized, she contracted a virus that constantly plagued her with problems such as vertigo and nausea; occasionally these so affected her musculoskeletal system that she moved with noticeable pain and needed a walker. She left her high-powered position and began to reconsider her identity. But one aspect of her identity remained intact: She was a Christian, a daughter of God, and member of a local church. Whatever came her way, Suzy sought to respond as someone bound by these relationships. As they do for most of us, these ties occasionally proved problematic.

As a member of a mainline liturgical congregation, Suzy asked for prayer. Yet she soon realized that being on the prayer chain triggered anxiety that then motivated her to lie about her condition and eventually caused her to stop asking for intercession. She explained, “I valued people’s prayers for me. But then they would come up to me and ask, ‘Are you feeling better?’ with a hopeful look on their faces. After a while, I just couldn’t do it anymore. I started to simply say, ‘Yes,’ even though it wasn’t true. I simply couldn’t continue to disappoint them—or to *be* a disappointment. I even felt guilty about my illness—and I certainly didn’t need that on top of everything else.” If Suzy felt this pressure, surely the perpetually “unhealed” in Mennonite, evangelical, charismatic, or Pentecostal congregations likely sense this, too.

Scripture commands prayer for the suffering and sick. For example, the Apostle James does this and implies that such prayer can make someone better (James 5:13-17). However, a close reading reveals that the *primary* reason we pray for the suffering and sick is not to cure them.<sup>13</sup> Rather, we are commanded to do so because it acknowledges that our lives are linked together in God’s own life and that God is implicated in our struggles.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, names and other identifying information have been removed.

<sup>13</sup> As Martin Dibelius notes, James begins with praying for healing but expands to “simply prayer in general.” Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 242.

<sup>14</sup> “More important [than ancient parallels with similarly abrupt endings] is the stress on healing and reconciliation: We have here the ideal of a united community.... Both the suffering and the cheerfulness to which this verse [verse 13] refers are left unaccounted for; but that is consistent with the imperatives in general: they hold in various circumstances.”

James requires us to take up one another's lives as lived before God together whatever our state—suffering, cheerful, or sick. While English translations commonly render the Greek ἀσθενεῖ in James 5:14 and κάμνοντα in verse 15 both as “sick,” James may use these different words to remind us that every sort of vulnerability must be received into the community's life in tangible, physical ways. He orders leaders to “anoint with oil in the name of the Lord,” and thus to draw near those who are ἀσθενεῖ or feeble. He then immediately follows up with the assurance that God works through these prayers for the good of the κάμνοντα, which can refer to a physical ailment but can also convey weariness of spirit or discouragement.<sup>15</sup> In drawing near pained bodies, we resist ordering existence around the seemingly powerful or ingratiating ourselves to the most attractive ally. The politics of Christ's body necessitate embodiment of dogged commitment to one another and to an insistence that God attend to his body, especially when that body is enduring hardship. In other words, prayer-in-pain sprints practitioners open, making them vulnerable to one another and to God.

Such vulnerability became evident when one of our close friends was diagnosed with cancer that had spread to his major organs. From a medical perspective, it was apparent that Scott would not be cured nor be declared cancer-free; we could hope against hope for years of life, although that seemed unlikely. This was especially hard to bear as he and his wife had four small children. As the cancer dragged on, I asked his wife how I could pray. She replied, “I want God to heal him. I know that is unlikely. But that is what I want.” She knew such a request was an awkward one for many; most of us get around this bold request by adding the ever-handy clause, “if it is your will.” Yet Scott's wife wasn't hedging her bets as she pleaded for Jesus to heal him; she was laid-out, prone, and begging for it. I felt reticent to do this out of a desire to protect myself from the exposure that such pleading required. I didn't want to have to deal with the devastation that seemed inevitable; why compound the sorrow of impending death by having it also reflect God's seeming ineptitude or silence? Other sorts of praying seemed relatively easy. But this sort of intercession fused my life to theirs; if God did not heal him, their distress would have to be, in a limited but real way, mine as well.

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Dale Allison, *James: A Critical Commentary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 750.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 766.

Much “prayer” about illness and chronic conditions embodies the opposite of James’s desire that we love one another as ourselves (James 2:8). We manage to entreat God in such a way that we distance ourselves from the suffering person and from one another. We separate from a God we cannot control and from people whose own fragility painfully recalls our own. To counteract this resistance to vulnerability, James commands us to habitually engage in these practices. As we sing and pray in accordance with lives in community, we become a people who readily acknowledge God’s work among us, including the healing of our bodies by the power of the Spirit. We also become those whose prayer and praise trains our bodies and souls in the posture of vulnerability. As is true throughout the letter, James tells us to enact—not merely assert or mutter—our trust in Christ’s redemption of our lives, however feeble or weak they prove to be.<sup>16</sup> James’s charge to physically and emotionally touch the suffering awakens in us a faith that chases out our trepidation and fear that misery will triumph, severing us from God and one another.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, note that the sick or despairing are required to join with those who are cheerful (James 5:13). Placing such a mandate on people wrestling with all manner of illness may be the hardest joining of all. Nonetheless, James presumes on the suffering ones to bear with those who easily sing. Even those weak of heart are pressed to offer themselves to others, including by witnessing to the joy of others. In doing so, the despairing may become caught up in the others’ delight, able to forget or be taken out of pain—or they may not. Shared expression, shared life, cannot be instrumentalized in this fashion. Unlike many in our churches and society, God insists that the sick and “feeble” have meaningful work to do. That brings us back to the primary reason we worship together: these practices unite our bodies through song, speech, and touch with one another and with God. This sort of communion differs from a voluntary club with members joined by those with similar abilities and interests; it enacts and testifies to the good life as

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<sup>16</sup> James states that our commitment to one another includes seeking out the lost or wanderer from the truth (James 5:19-20). Throughout the letter, the steadfast love of the saints for each other remains a vehicle of God’s grace and mercy to save. This may seem dissonant to us, given the harsh judgments James makes on these same agents of grace.

<sup>17</sup> That James addresses the problem of evil and suffering is also clear in James 5:11.

Christians understand it.

Yet it is not only that such practices witness to what is possible by God's Spirit among us. Relentless companionship turns out to be the prescription for our deepest illness: We are alienated from one another and yet God created us for shared work; we are lonely yet created for relationship with others across divisions of every sort.<sup>18</sup> This, then, is the healing for which we can always pray with confidence; the solace and affections these attachments afford us become cause for song, even in a world (and in communities) not yet fully redeemed.

### **From Stigma to Stigmata: Storying Chronic Illness in Light of the Crucified and Risen Christ**

Suzy sometimes denied her illness and hid significant parts of herself from her community. Hiding from oneself and from others is a mark of the experience of shame, and as with Suzy chronic illnesses can foster this more than acute ones.<sup>19</sup> Arthur Kleinman notes this phenomenon in his much-cited study of illness narratives.<sup>20</sup> In a chapter entitled "The Stigma and Shame of Illness,"

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<sup>18</sup> This is one implication of Genesis 1:27-29; see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), who asserts that NT is almost exclusively addressed to "you all," underscoring the importance of community for the context of faithfulness to Christ. Such a claim does not exclude persons whom we may consider to have limited relational capacity. See Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> For reasons that both are explored in, and can be inferred from, this essay, this response to chronic conditions often differs from response to a severe accident or a diagnosis of cancer—especially if the cancer does not cause a long, lingering death. Because the medical model and its narrative often plot lives, most disability theologians critique the habit of defining people by their disease or condition (someone "is" a diabetic, schizophrenic, narcoleptic, etc.). For shame as related to the social gaze, see for example Thomas Scheff, "The Ubiquity of Hidden Shame in Modernity," in *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 2 (2014): 129-41.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Thomas Reynolds also reflects on the stigmatization of the "disabled" and Erving Goffman's definitive work on this as producing a "cult of normalcy." See Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 63. Reynolds unpacks how this dynamic "disrupts the fabric of an economy of exchange" similar to one described here, one that also rests on mutual vulnerability as crucial (65). Reynolds ends with a charge to hospitality that leaves largely unexplored the yoke of fellowship placed upon the previously stigmatized with those tempted to stigmatize. See especially chapter 7, "Being Together."

Kleinman notes the evolution of the idea of “stigma.” Originally meaning a branding or a mark (as of a slave, convicted thief, traitor, et al.), the term shifted to mean a person “marked by a deformity, blemish, or illness.”<sup>21</sup> But in the West, stigma often refers not merely or even primarily to a physical state but rather to an identity, a sense of who the person is or how they are perceived. The psychological dynamic for the stigmatized results in an internalized sense of being “inferior, deviant, or shamefully different.”<sup>22</sup>

As the Apostle Paul reminds Christians, churches tend to reproduce the values and habits of the surrounding culture within their gatherings. So, what are tempting responses to the stigma of chronic illness? As Kleinman notes about disability generally, the chronically ill often find other people react to their condition “with great ambivalence, ranging from gross inattention to embarrassing overconcern.”<sup>23</sup> The former might initially seem unlikely or be quickly denied in congregations. Surely Christians fall into the latter category, if indeed they are guilty of such ambivalence? But Kleinman identifies what may well be a particular difficulty of being chronically ill in the church, with those who display such “overconcern” ably hiding their own insecurities behind a patina of piety. This tendency needs to be intentionally opposed, directly addressing the potential shame or humiliation the chronically ill face in a culture enamored with youthful, beautiful bodies. Instead, churches need to proclaim in word and deed that all bear in their bodies particular gifts, including bodies in pain. In doing so, local bodies of Christ must genuinely honor the weak as necessary for the wholeness of those bodies, rather than (as some are prone to do) tokenize them either to bolster a sense of moral superiority or to prove a congregation’s inclusiveness.

If communities of Christians are to offer an alternative, they must acknowledge the mechanism of stigmatization, then move to the redemption of shame that characterizes the Christian story. This narrative places an intention to humiliate at its center: the crucifixion.<sup>24</sup> For those who

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<sup>21</sup> Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Christians often emphasize the pain of crucifixion as a means of death. Among evangelicals (and perhaps others), there is a common, seemingly obvious false assertion that in so dying Jesus experiences “the worst pain.” Surely human cruelty and a survey of torture in our own century in my own culture reveals the fallacy of this assertion. The cross is significant for

submit to the cross's peculiar logic, this vehicle meant to shame becomes a sign of God's power and, further, of the sufferers' confidence in God's care.<sup>25</sup> Far from denying its stigma, we Christians embrace it, voluntarily branding ourselves by hanging this means of execution around our necks or on our walls. At its best, the sign reminds us to resist the impulse to deny our liabilities, to emulate the vulnerability of our crucified God, and accept (not seek) suffering as redeemable. Christians must recover the paradoxical nature of this symbol: A shorthand for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, through whose tortured body the God of Israel extends an invitation into the deeply good life. But the cross also should recall for us that God's powerful response to the crucifixion refuses to erase the marks of attempted humiliation: The risen body of his son proclaims his scorn of the intended shame in the scars that remain.

Even those of us most versed in theology can press against the cross's implications. A few years ago, a group of theologians sat around a table after a lecture on the redemption of suffering and its relationship to memory.<sup>26</sup> Someone asked how the fact that Christ is raised with his wounds matters for our understanding of pain and evil. Before the lecturer could respond, another theologian quickly interjected, "That's only because he has not yet ascended. In my tradition, Christ does not have wounds once he returns to heaven." The impulse to cover over the wounds of the risen Christ reflects an anxiety about bodily vulnerability as something to be overcome rather than redeemed through Christ. Shame can be understood as a factor of another's gaze or willingness to look upon us; it is how someone perceives us. Many Protestants in the contemporary West remain scandalized by the cross more than they wish to admit: We cannot gaze too long on suffering; we do not wish to stare at a cross with Jesus's mangled body still hanging there. We

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many reasons, but in its cultural context it was an especially dishonorable execution, reserved for low-lives and criminals. That the Lord of heaven and earth submitted to such treatment is the scandal about which Paul writes. See 1 Cor. 1:21-25.

<sup>25</sup> This is at the heart of theodicy as usually conceived: that God cares and is powerful. The difference in approach is that the atonement refuses a path of insulation from evil and suffering, while most theodical articulations presume this as determinative of a good life with such a God.

<sup>26</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

cannot look upon another's suffering without needing either to look away or to assure ourselves that such suffering will be eventually be erased from memory. Why might this be the case? How does this erasure of Christ's wounds remind us of temptations to deny the power of the cross?<sup>27</sup>

In the West, we Christians have imbibed a presumption that our primary task is to be *effective agents* of God's reign rather than primarily *faithful witnesses* to its reality; that is, many of us presume that our call is to change the world. If I cannot alter someone's illness, it is a waste of my talents and time; better then to focus on areas to which one feels "called." As the elder in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* confesses, "The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man [sic] in particular"—perhaps especially when confronted with the uncomfortably intractable circumstances of that woman or man?

While bizarre to many Protestants now, the history of the church tells of those who have experienced stigmata, that is, of Christ's wounds appearing on their own bodies. Importantly, one could misunderstand this as seeking suffering for suffering's sake. That would be a misreading of most of these stories. Rather, the stigmata appear as an outward sign of these persons' identification with the world God "so loved that he gave his only son." As David Matzko McCarthy says regarding the case of Padre Pio, his piety was produced

not by a desire to suffer for the sake of suffering, but through a straightforward and steady desire for friendship. The beloved is the suffering God. . . . Padre Pio desires to share compassion *with* Christ, and his body becomes a site of this union. He is marked by stigmata in 1918, during the final months of World War I and amid the Spanish flu epidemic [that killed an estimated 50 million worldwide].<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> While separated by thousands of years and proudly more advanced, my culture is not so unlike that of the Greeks and Jews of 1 Cor. 1:23-24, who find the cross foolishness or a stumbling block. This appears to be the case among highly educated Christians, too. On the importance of these wounds, see Nancy Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberative Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, *Sharing God's Good Company: A Theology of the Communion of Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 131.



Whatever one thinks about the history and experiences of stigmata in the church, it is a metaphor for both the endurer of chronic illness and those who come alongside him. Stigmata take the signs of Jesus's shameful death—not only healed scars but as gaping, still-bleeding lesions—and openly celebrate them as opportunities to draw near to others in compassion and to draw near to God in shared love for the world. In like fashion, the saints take up the shameful of chronic illness or other obvious bodily injury to re-story it. While tempted to draw a dark silence over such conditions or deny their power or pain, they shine light upon them as a reality taken up in the crucified Christ.

However, not only the sufferer feels shame and requires a new narrative to escape it. As Kleinman observes, the church can shame not merely by overconcern but also by “gross inattention.” Why do we avoid the chronically ill among us, pretending that we have not seen them or altering our path so we can dodge them? Why do we avoid conversations that might raise the specter of their condition? While there are surely many dynamics to this, those not in such situations may well be responding to shame. This shame could appear as a vague sense of guilt that we ourselves are not so burdened. It could belie a sense of inadequacy that we cannot fix another's problem or know the “right” thing to say (as if making others “better” were the main goal of communal life). Another major factor is that the chronically ill remind us of human fragility, of our susceptibility as creatures of earth. This may be a different sort of “nakedness” of our bodies than that of Genesis 3:7. But the unwillingness to acknowledge vulnerability is the same: People hide from one another, move apart, and work to cover over ineffectiveness and fears with fig leaves of avoidance or studied indifference.

A friend visited Rome near the end of Pope John Paul II's life. At mass he was shocked by the pope's condition as he was wheeled down the central aisle: Hunched in the chair, drooling, a seeming shell of the once vibrant and athletic man he was. Yet how remarkable that he—and his community—were so confident in the Spirit's work through him that he did not need to feel ashamed of his body. Instead, his condition reminded all in attendance that “extraordinary power belongs to God.” Christians offer their bodies in worship because doing so allows the Spirit to work.<sup>29</sup> While often citing this

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<sup>29</sup> 2 Cor. 4:7-10.

text, many Christians struggle to willingly proclaim through their body's vulnerability that Christ overcomes all affliction, despair, and confusion. John Paul II and his community testify that what the world often sees as stigmatizing incapacity can become a stigmata.

As the Apostle Paul puts it, our porousness—bodies like clay pots susceptible to all manner of social, emotional, physical woes—makes possible participation in the goodness and beauty that is a truthful witness to the good that is Christ. This is quite a different way of participating God's goodness than is often considered by Christians, perhaps by North American Protestants in particular. (Such a sensibility about our bodies could cause us to engage in the push for "death with dignity" from a different angle: What if the above image of John Paul II became the measure of dignity in the face of death's decay?)

By taking the scandal of chronic illness up into the body of the Risen Wounded, both the sufferer and those who accompany him actively reject shame and usurp it as Jesus did. He intentionally "despised the shame" of naked, public torture for the sake of what seems counterintuitive: joy.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Christians take their stories up into the grand narrative of God, who turns experiences that can humiliate and separate into means of healing and unity. While our world commonly feeds us such pop-psychological pabulum as "Seek out happy people so you can be happy" or "Avoid people who are downers," Christians insist that accompanying the suffering is a privilege to be embraced, sacred space in which to encounter the mystery of Easter's vision of a well-lived life.<sup>31</sup>

What habits or dispositions must we cultivate to break stigmatization? What stories guide the need to bring attention to the chronically ill in ways that do not mock or isolate, but rather plunder social or internalized shame

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<sup>30</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2.

<sup>31</sup> See the many articles on "positivity" on the popular website "lifehack." While there is solid research in psychology about the importance of habits such as gratitude or a growth mindset, advice such as "14 Ways Positive People Separate Themselves from Negative Energy" includes prescriptions to "Believe in yourself" and "Avoid negativity": <https://www.lifehack.org/284661/14-ways-positive-people-separate-themselves-from-negative-energy>. Absent a thick account of what counts as "negative" or "positive," one wonders if this results in people becoming unable to face honestly a world fraught with injustice and pain as well as marked by beauty.

in order to fund loving connection?

### **A Tale of Two Daughters: An Imaginative Exercise**

In Mark 5:21-43, the otherwise terse Gospel writer draws a detailed picture of Jesus' encounter with two people, each of whom seeks him out for his healing power. This story helps us re-imagine how to conceive of chronic illness. It begins with Jairus bursting through a crowd to fall at Jesus' feet. Here is a man with every social advantage, religiously honored and thus probably a person of means; important for the contrast to come, he is male in a culture in which men had status over women. Yet he approaches the nomadic rabbi humbly and in undisguised desperation, throwing himself to the ground. In medical terms his beloved daughter's situation is acute; she is "on the point of death." After Jesus agrees to accompany the desperate father, another character mysteriously lurks on the edges who will only later come fully onto the scene.

Jairus's crisis likely excited the crowd, and everyone jostles Jesus as they all hurry to the dying girl. The disciples must be delighted, as they have had several skirmishes with the religious elites that have not gone well (cf. Mark 2:7; 2:16; 3:3); the most recent one has been frightening, with some scribes asserting that Jesus' capacity to heal the demonized is actually a sign of his fidelity to Beelzebul (3:22). Finally, they will have some powerful people on their side!

Inexplicably, Jesus abruptly halts this hurried procession; people slam against one another, toes are crushed and bodies jostle, readjusting as inertia necessitates. Turning this way and that, he asks, "Who touched my garment?" Imagine the woman, who has crept up behind Jesus, brushing against his cloak and feeling suddenly altered. Unlike Jairus, who had the confidence to speak directly, to confess to the rabbi his need, she silently slinks away, minimizing herself as best she can. She seeks invisibility, welcoming the shadow of the throng and its electric atmosphere. For the briefest moment she must have been elated, feeling the success of her scheme.

But suddenly she is called out. She freezes, aware that she has been caught.

In the meantime the typically clueless Markan disciples chide Jesus for the stupidity of his question. "Everyone is touching you—we're in a crowd!"

Their seemingly rude reply springs from their anxiety, although of a quite different sort than that of the woman: What if Jesus blows this, if he openly dishonors the leader who has come to him, if he cannot get to the daughter in time? And then there is Jairus, now even more worried, apprehensive, and puzzled by Jesus' response. As in so many places and spaces of contemporary life, the scene pulses with anxiety, and among all but Jesus a sense of urgency that sets them on edge.

When it is apparent the rabbi will not budge until she comes forward, the woman makes her way to Jesus' feet, shivering with fear. Now the figure glimpsed earlier comes to the center: a woman with a condition causing her to constantly bleed from her womb. This renders her ritually, religiously unclean, likely barren, and indicates she is possibly divorced or unmarried.<sup>32</sup> In an era with little medical knowledge of how to help her, she has been subjected to procedures one can only imagine. Like many today, health care expenses have bankrupted her.<sup>33</sup> Hers is a chronic medical condition that results in chronic social, religious, relational, and economic alienation. She is terrified that she has stolen something valuable and taken what she did not deserve. She has insulted Jesus. What does she then do? She tries to help him understand her desperation and "tells him the whole truth."

Jesus patiently listens as she tells her tale, line by agonizing line, doctor by doctor, relationship by relationship, symptom by escalating symptom, and last coin into poverty. If you have ever had a medical condition—let alone one lasting twelve years—you can envision how long such a whole truth might go on. Jesus waits, and by doing so forces the crowd to attend to this

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<sup>32</sup> It is not menstruation as a state of "uncleanness" per se that makes the woman's situation dire. Rather, as an ongoing state without relief it negatively impacts her familial relations as well as her social, religious, and economic well-being. Many Christians misunderstand the meaning of purity laws; see Amy-Jill Levine, "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors re: Judaism" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 501-504 and Jonathan Klawans, "Concepts of Purity" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2041-48, as well as his *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000). Jesus uses purity language throughout the Gospels, speaking as a rabbi who interprets the tradition and adapts these concepts accordingly. See Matt. 23:25-28, where he utilizes this language as the prophets do, to challenge the "uncleanness" of the religious leaders.

<sup>33</sup> In 2017, the Motley Fool website cited a Kaiser Health Foundation study stating that medical bills remain the number one cause of personal bankruptcy in the United States: <https://www.fool.com/retirement/2017/05/01/this-is-the-no-1-reason-americans-file-for-bankrup.aspx>.

long story of heartache, loss, desperation as physical pain spirals downward into utter isolation. Finally, he responds to her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”

What is Jesus doing here? First, by his non-anxious presence to her story amid the urgency caused by a “realistic” view of things, he conveys that her unique experience of sorrow deserves attention. She approached him in the posture of shame, assuming that she had to steal a healing rather than ask for it, yet her action is not without courage and grit; she thinks he has something she needs. Jesus addresses her as “daughter,” making clear that she is kin, as beloved a member of the family as the girl lying in bed in Jairus’s house. He clarifies that her healing was no accident or moment of magic: her faith—however small—sought him out for help. He ends by sending her out in peace, blessing her for new and renewed relationship to herself as well as to others.<sup>34</sup>

By doing all this before the crowd, Jesus destigmatizes a humiliating illness, a condition likely to have been interpreted by at least some as a matter of her sin or of her family’s moral failure.<sup>35</sup> He does this by calling attention to the illness, but not through pointing to it in disdain. He does not tokenize her situation, proudly displaying her as an example of his magnanimity. Instead, he holds open a space to tell her story in her own words and for however long it takes. He makes the community witnesses to it, despite how they squirm because they do not intuitively value her (and her ailment) as much as Jairus’s daughter’s condition. Using his authority to defang her shame and hold up her previously stigmatizing condition, Jesus brings her fully back to the people from whom she had been separated.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Mills and Warren Carter argue that Mark always insists on the nexus of Christology and discipleship. This remaking of kinship also proves disruptive to Roman imperialism or other claims that might organize our lives. See Kathleen Mills and Warren Carter, *The Kinship of Jesus: Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), especially 136-40.

<sup>35</sup> For Jesus’ response to the tendency to presume that the cause of ailments is ethical transgression, see John 9. For a reflection on this passage that influences this essay, see Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*.

<sup>36</sup> This entire scene enacts Paul’s charge in 1 Cor. 12 to “honor the weaker member.” Unfortunately, we tend to use the weak to bolster our own position as stronger. This tendency Paul incites us to resist by receiving the gifts of those otherwise overlooked by the measures of a world enamored with certain sorts of power.

This is what healing looks like. Those severed from others, those ashamed of their sin or of their situations, come into a new relationship with Christ who heals. This is also why healing in the Christian tradition is never merely physical, nor is it ever equated cleanly with curing disease. Our restoration is finally only brought through bodily death, yet we hope to die as healed in spirit, soul, and heart as we can possibly be. Such an orientation toward healing affirms the church's ministry to those silenced or humiliated by their condition: Christians must make spaces to witness these stories, to hold them as sacred, and thereby to reverse the mechanism of shaming that places some on the margins of a crowded, fast-paced culture enamored with efficiency and peopled by shiny, happy humans.<sup>37</sup>

More important, perhaps, is the church's task to recall that all our stories are "re-meant" by being linked to Christ's own story and thus to one another's stories. By the end, Jairus and his family see a miracle no one could imagine. Only because of the woman does Jairus have the opportunity to confront his deepest fear, his most profound vulnerability as a parent. The disciples squirrel away this experience, pondering it as they begin to comprehend the upside-down kingdom into which they are drawn. How do they resist the magnetic pull of anxiety (e.g., the need to be significant to the significant, to matter to those who matter) and come to know that God cares for each of us but puts the weak, the suffering, at the head of the line?<sup>38</sup>

The story carries other implications too numerous to explore here, upending as it does the values and presumptions of our era as much—or even more—than it did in first-century Palestine. However, consider just two elements that also open paths for understanding analogous tendencies in other cultural contexts. First, Christians must resist the tendency to overlook or overrun the chronically ill amidst the seeming urgency of acute conditions. This can be enacted in seemingly innocent ways, such as when we value efficiency and productivity even in "Christian" events or contexts. In my context of Southern California, for example, people often walk and act quickly because the volume of work done, rather than the quality of care

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<sup>37</sup> On the need to assure the woman publicly as part of her healing, see Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 120-21.

<sup>38</sup> Consider also Mark 9-10 in this light, in which discussions of greatness or those who are first are placed within charges to welcome children or to receive the kingdom as a child.

for those around us as we do it, is of utmost importance. Many churches focus prayer chains and meal trains around those who have a health crisis (as we should), yet become weary or simply forgetful of tending those who might benefit from consistent, small kindnesses as ways of honoring that their current story is one of pain and difficulty. In disability studies, people speak of “crip time” (derived from “cripple”), because everything takes so much longer when one is, for example, in a wheelchair directed by blowing in a tube and speaking by poking at a pad with a stylus in their mouth. As we see in the Markan story, Jesus moves in crip time, sure that time is a gift in which God’s power and presence will continue to appear.<sup>39</sup> The task is to ask ourselves how we are like the impatient disciples, how are we enacting the faithless, fearful tyranny of the urgent instead of the gentle patience of the reign of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Second, congregations must realize that it is the strong who need the weak. Without having crip time thrust upon our procession of business-as-usual, Christians miss much of the power of God and, as above, the deepest miracle—that of resurrection, which reframes all our ventures and provides the ultimate horizon against which Christians read all lives. In a drive to be “authentic” as much of our culture perceives it, as people pursue individual happiness (or even familial, merely local goods), Christians push past those whom we need, those who prevent us from telling our life stories untruthfully and in shrunken, impoverished ways. Our lives derive their sensibility and produce good fruit as they are mediated through the life, death, and resurrection of the Human One. Only then do we become fully human. Like Jairus and the older daughter, our lives are “re-meant” as we let go

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<sup>39</sup> On crip time, see Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>40</sup> As a fruit of the Spirit, patience is never mere waiting or, worse, stoicism; rather, patience names our ability to be fully present to any moment, confident that God’s Spirit is working for a good usually not evident or easily named by us. As Henri Nouwen puts it, patience is “a willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are.” Nouwen, “A Spirituality of Waiting,” available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=nouwen+spirituality+of+waiting&oq=nouwen+spirituality+of+waiting&aqs=chrome..69i57j0.6310j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

of delusions of control and fears of death. We learn to trust God's healing (social, relational, spiritual, physical) only as we come to him acknowledging our need as well as our obligation to tend to one another. We can only do this because Jesus's power is boundless. If he were limited in power or in his scope of concern (i.e., *only* for those with status or *only* for those without it), the anxiety all these characters feel would be well-warranted and their desire to seek their own goods separately a wise choice. As it is, they begin to live truthfully as they come to rely in embodied ways on God's fidelity and authority over all that is.

### **Vomiting for Love: Why the Chronically Ill Are Also Obligated to Care**

Like the daughter in the Markan story, Suzy shared her story in a bioethics course. She described how, even at seminary, students seemed to willfully disregard her condition when it flared to obvious discomfort and pain. People forgot her unseen difficulties when planning events and often exuded impatience when she could not respond rapidly to their calls or texts. She spoke of friends frustrated by her need to cancel plans at the last minute because driving had become impossible. In particular, she recounted frustrations faced by those who, like her, usually present as "normal" people and whose persistent bodily challenges, pains, and seizures slip easily from the minds of the "actually" normal.<sup>41</sup> She was especially animated when discussing her interactions with health professions, which for most people with chronic illnesses are a constant aspect of life: waiting a long time in uncomfortable chairs, grumpy receptionists, and rude or mean negotiations about coverage, authorizations, and insurance. For those familiar with disability literature, this was somewhat expected.

What I did not expect was her discussion of how Christ commanded her to love—especially to love the myriad health care people who ironically sometimes overlooked her material and emotional well-being (e.g., her time, physical needs, or fears). As an Episcopalian, she worshiped through the Book of Common Prayer, which leads people to confess an obligation to others. Suzy followed Jesus, who commanded her to love her neighbor

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<sup>41</sup> This language is problematic: normal, able/disabled, etc. For an influential reframing of disability in light of the wounded and raised Christ, see Eiseland, *The Disabled God*. She points out that we are all at best "temporarily able."



as herself and, more annoyingly, to love her enemies. This latter group most often came to her in the form of an assistant demanding yet another signature, a nurse brushing off her urgency or pain, or a doctor unwilling to listen more than two minutes to her complicated history before deciding on a treatment. She realized that these were the people she had to love and for whom she was to pray; this was one of her communities of concern, her mission field—and not one to which she was happily commissioned. Suzy set out as best she could to consider her neighbor's pain: Why was the person at the desk so anxious? How could she convey mercy to the beleaguered insurance customer service representative, who may be on his tenth call with someone in dire circumstances?

It revealed my bias that I had thought about Suzy more as a victim of her illness than as a person called by Christ to care for others in a particular sort of body. That body meant she had a sometimes challenging set of persons to whom she embodied God's mercy. As she noted, the Good Samaritan didn't exactly get to choose, either; he happened upon the nearly-dead, so it was the nearly-dead to whom he was obligated to extend God's extravagant mercy.

In this way, Suzy recalls for us that because each one is taken up into the broken body of Christ, each has their own forms of dying to enact. She insisted that while some may be tempted to focus on their own struggles, many are victims of circumstances not easily named or acknowledged: sexual abuse survivors, children of neglectful parents, the brunt of others' cruelty, and so on. In some sense, Suzy and all who endure chronic pain and illness could justly claim they are victims—of others' actions toward them or perhaps of genetics interacting with a fractured world. While the cross never denies the genuine tragedy of Good Friday, Easter weekend proclaims that no one taken into Christ's body is ever *just* a victim. It does not deny elements of tragedy in the human experience, including the way chronic conditions and illnesses worry and weary caregivers like my friend cited at the beginning of this essay. The cross encourages us to weep in response to genuine loss and deep pain, to the ways that the world—and the small universes of our bodies—long for an end to them.

Suzy will not end the story there. Every year she moves through Lent and celebrates Easter. Part of Easter is that Christians are given a job to do:

They are sent into the world to testify to the hope that pain and suffering do not win. Perhaps paradoxically, Suzy and others with chronic conditions of pain and suffering powerfully witness to their defeat by setting their faces to love others through Christ. In so doing, they link their own suffering to Christ's, to a Christ who sees, who alone truly knows, the difficulty of such a task. People tend to pity the chronically ill, as if their condition somehow makes them disabled for love. Yet if Paul is correct, if we participate in Christ's suffering that was a suffering for the sake of love, then the chronically ill are those who "get" Jesus in ways others can as yet only imagine. Like Christ, Suzy refuses to turn aside from her enemies. As the arms and legs of the body of Christ, her body resists all divisions, including the world of health care that can erect barriers between her and those meant to provide for her healing. By resisting this systemic and personal fragmentation, she participates in the best possible sort of life, even as it continues to be marked by too much sorrow, too much pain, too much nausea. (Of course, she shares in Christ's life in many other ways, such as her writing, new work, search for a perfect cup of coffee, relishing of the arts, and tending of friends.)

In his long battle with cancer, Scott displayed what it looks like to resist identifying as a victim of tragedy. He should have died quickly. But surely enough, God answered prayers with the (complicated) response that he would unexpectedly live almost ten years with cancer. This meant an acute condition became a chronic one. Between chemotherapy treatments, Scott would be the first to arrive to move families from one home to another. At other times, he curled up in the family van, too exhausted to get out. When he spoke to my bioethics class, he admitted that by temperament and conviction he would have found it easier many times to simply let the cancer run its course. But he had small children, and he had been called to care for them, commanded to make them the center of his concern as a follower of Christ. Sometimes the chemo was brutal, and there were seasons when half the month was spent in the bathroom. He struggled with this situation, as it seemed pointless since he was happy to die as a Christian. But his life was not his own; it was tied to others. He struggled to figure out how to endure his chemotherapy. "So," he told the class, "sometimes I vomit two weeks a month as a way to love my kids." In this way, Scott mirrored the One who enabled him to be a good and long-suffering father.

In different ways, both Suzy and Scott remind us that all those wrestling with and enduring chronic conditions continue to be obligated to care. Sometimes this circle of concern is seemingly small or insignificant.<sup>42</sup> But if a good life is one connected to others and to God—and joined by steadfast (though not flawless) love—then they also flourish in the truest sense of that word. They actively resist the temptation that they are merely victims, that their lives are somehow merely tragic. They do so by sowing seeds of the only thing that lasts, Paul’s “greatest” virtue, by linking their lives with the saints and with all who offer themselves for the good of others as the thriving Body of Christ.

### **Conclusion: Beauty and the Unfairness of Life**

Attending to frustration, anxiety, weariness, and pain can lead some people with chronic illnesses to despair. My friend whose daughter has narcolepsy bears not only myriad disruptions to her own hopes and desires; sometimes she also aches, watching her child struggle to establish normalcy in a universe in which little of that can exist. She knows she cannot project or plan into the future, as every day has more than enough worry of its own. I feel myself at times wanting to push away from her or others like her; I need to be truthful about the strength of this unchristian yet palpable desire. At some level, I suspect I worry I will catch the trauma. Or, even worse, I fret that if I could actually grasp its depth as one truly moved by compassion, I could not even bear it second-hand. So is faithlessness laid bare, my living into a story that causes a heart to shrink from dishonesty rather than to expand in uncontrolled vulnerability.

We may wish it otherwise, but it is verifiable that life is not fair. It is not even close. A basic Christian assumption is that while this is clearly true, each of our lives is lived *coram deo*: before or in the presence of God. Importantly, it is not lived primarily before others. Søren Kierkegaard famously noted that he “played to an audience of one.” If this is so, considerations of a response to chronic illness must be considered without turning to the side, without comparing our life with another’s life. Thus, whether I think I could not bear

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<sup>42</sup> See for example Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* or Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 1998) for revisions of personal significance and of what it means to become more fully human.

another's life is to a great extent neither here nor there. Nor does it matter that there are many other lives that I envy, for which I would be happy to exchange my existence. That, too, matters little. And not merely because "you don't really know someone else's story." Sure, but I do know some key elements and there are some for which I would willingly trade my own and vice versa.

As is true for all life, but especially in terms of pain, no one but God—one who knows us more than we know ourselves—can comprehend our sorrows and peculiar burdens.<sup>43</sup> Experiences of pain and chronic illness bring the existential reality of solitude and aloneness of everyone before God into sharp relief, while comparisons of fortune or misfortune turn people from being *for* one another to being resentful or fearful *of* one another. Given these conditions, and accepting the Christian story, humans flourish by embracing the peculiar embodied existence we have been given as the only possible vehicle for rendering our singularity into a means for vulnerable communion. The key witness of the church lies in each member's offering of their body to the body of Christ, a communion that necessitates joining with other unique bodies in an unlikely yet beautiful mess.

Paul describes this in 1 Cor. 12, where he emphasizes the gifting of each one of us while insisting that we are one organism joined across differences and divisions through Christ. He coaches Christians to actively resist the politics of power-as-usual in honor of the weakest. But his conclusion is rather astonishing, claiming that in this body, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

Paul thus recognizes the unfair distribution of joys and sufferings among members. What these texts testify is that, against all odds, those who endure chronic illness or other difficult conditions remain attached to those who do not, to such a degree that they "have the same care for one another." Those with chronic conditions bring their gifts to the body of Christ; they too care for one another. 1 Cor. 12 names the omnipresent pressures against this sort of joining, pushing against this sort of unity-without-uniformity by self-

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<sup>43</sup> Some maintain that pain is unique in its capacity to isolate us, including from ourselves. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985) and David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Berkeley Press, 1993).

degradation (“I am not an eye”) or by severing oneself from the seemingly weak (“I have no need of you”). Both parties are deluded and their delusions would blow them apart. For Paul as for Jesus on the cross, only those willing to take up whatever suffering is theirs to endure—as a companion to the enduring, as one who endures, or as a combination of both—also enjoy the wonder and beauty of a deeply good life.<sup>44</sup>

Jazz great Louis Armstrong was described as “a sad soul with a cheerful disposition.” Saints display this same sensibility, because they live their lives before the crucified and risen Lord by whose power and grace they willingly, easily join in others’ lives—whatever suits. Like Armstrong’s jazz, each member takes up their unique body to join with others who must play their own part. Sweetness and beauty marks communities that embrace the strange inseparability of a capacity for deep happiness with a willingness engage with pain. Such is the multi-textured nature of flourishing from within the Christian narrative. Amidst cultural pressures to pursue myriad alterative visions of the good life, the unsettling presence and participation of the chronically ill press us to embrace the mystery of vulnerable communion made possible by the wounded, risen body of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> It is crucial to note that Paul does not treat both delusions the same way, as if both are equally destructive. Instead, he chides those in positions of power or with status that they *need* the weak. This is not a romantic insight. Rather, it is a reality that must be enacted in practices of honoring the weak, of embodying genuine appreciation of their gifts. Otherwise, the body of Christ merely mimics the politics of a world that fosters a self-pity which allows the hurting to wiggle out of their obligation to love. But the greater harm comes from those who think themselves independent, who may nod to the fragile or socially powerless from a distance, who may even mouth words of compassion. It is these “able” who, Paul warns, cannot survive without those they have overrun in their habits of effectiveness.

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# Developing a “More Honest” Political Theology?

*Paul G. Doerksen*

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes discourse within the field of Canadian Mennonite political theology since 1970, characterizing such discourse as an ongoing attempt to develop a “more honest” political theology. It traces the trajectory of this theology by describing briefly the impact of John Howard Yoder’s project on Canadian Mennonites, followed by a description of A. James Reimer’s attempt to call Mennonites to be more honest about their political commitments. Further, the paper highlights several current threads in contemporary Mennonite political theology that, while susceptible to making theology superfluous, nonetheless display an intensified honesty, a clarified vision, and a search for truthfulness.

While Ted Regehr’s volume of the *Mennonites in Canada* trilogy is primarily historical in its pursuits, issues that concern political theology are far from absent. Rather, many of the political themes taken up by Regehr have remained central to Canadian Mennonite political theological reflection since 1970: struggles that accompany Canadian Mennonite transformation while seeking to resist total assimilation into worldly society; ongoing internal dissent regarding the nature of Mennonites’ relationship to the state; an evolving Mennonite view of the nature of Christian political responsibility; the change from sectarian, separatist postures to more interventionist, charitable, and supportive roles within society; issues that accompany the pursuit of “Native Ministries” and the attendant groping toward an understanding of indigenization, along with a growing awareness of the fraught nature of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto, ON: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996), 3, 4, 49-56, 78, 332ff., 376. This article originated as a presentation for a conference entitled “A People of Diversity: Mennonites in Canada since 1970.” Held in Winnipeg (November 15-17, 2018), the conference was described in part as a virtual fourth volume of the three-volume series *Mennonites in Canada*, of which Regehr’s volume was the third.

In this article I will look at how some questions and issues have been pursued by paying attention to the discourse within Canadian Mennonite political theology. My characterization of this discourse since 1970 is that it as an ongoing attempt to develop a “more honest” political theology.” This way of putting the matter draws on the important work of A. James Reimer in his posthumously published *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*. In response to a well-known book by John Howard Yoder, *Being Honest in Just War Thinking*, Reimer considered naming his own project “When Law and Civil Institutions are Just: Honesty in Pacifist Thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

Yoder’s book exemplifies the author’s long-term engagement with issues of peace and war, and displays the remarkable level of seriousness with which Yoder takes people with whom he disagrees. Often in theological (and other) arguments we try to convince others by solidifying their arguments, attacking them, and so on. It is no different with those who embrace pacifism and those who embrace the Just War tradition. But Yoder goes to extraordinary lengths both to understand and to explain the view that he does not personally hold. He explicated its finer points in his teaching, public presentations, and various publications. To be sure, he engaged in much of this kind of work in order to promote peace, but he also intended that people who disagreed with him would recognize and embrace their own positions more honestly. Defeat of the opposition was not his primary point or aim; rather patient, vulnerable pursuit of understanding and faithful action is what is at stake. Thus, for Yoder, continued relationship, necessary change, future discussion, and conflict patiently pursued remain as possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Reimer picked up on this notion of honesty but turned it reflexively inward to a consideration of Mennonites, arguing from a theologically-derived politics that they need to be more honest about their involvements and embeddedness within broader society, and as a result embrace a more positive view of law and civil society than they have done so far.<sup>4</sup> This initiative—to be more honest—has been extended since the publication of

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<sup>2</sup> A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 3.

<sup>3</sup> The most important source in this regard is John Howard Yoder, *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 2.

Reimer's book, and is pursuing important directions that include calls for courageous and radical openness, self-reflexive vulnerability, penitence, openness to changing theology, and to ever-deepening and dispossessive Christian faith.

What I see developing is a political theology that finds its way by faith in Jesus Christ within a fallen world, one in which we Mennonites are haltingly acknowledging our deep complicity—while becoming more aware of the danger of leaving our faith and theology behind just when that theology calls us to embody our faith more authentically. In this essay I will trace the trajectory of what I view as a more honest Canadian Mennonite political theology by describing the impact of Yoder's project on Mennonite thinking. Next I will describe Reimer's attempt to have Mennonites be more honest about their political commitments. Then I will identify several threads in contemporary Canadian Mennonite political theology that, while susceptible to making theology superfluous, nonetheless display an intensified honesty, a clarified vision, and a search for truthfulness.

### ***The Politics of Jesus as Shaping Vision***

Any attempt to understand, trace, or describe the development of Mennonite political theology in Canada since 1970 requires taking note of the work of Yoder, since "Anabaptist political theology in our time has been most influentially articulated in [his] writings. . . ."<sup>5</sup> However, this attempt is complicated by the disturbing, ongoing revelations of the violence he perpetrated<sup>6</sup> that have put our political theology into a "new discursive environment" which must struggle with the rhetorical, epistemic, and sexual violence of Yoder himself.<sup>7</sup> Central to his influence was the 1972 publication of *The Politics of Jesus*.<sup>8</sup> His political theology made an impact on a number

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<sup>5</sup> P. Travis Kroeker, "Messianic Political Theology: Yoder Contra Redekop," *Direction* 38, no. 1 (2009): 58.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7-80. It is important to note that while Yoder's work exerted considerable influence, it was significantly contested and critiqued before the exposure of the extent of his sexual violence.

<sup>7</sup> Maxwell Kennel, "The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018): 316.

<sup>8</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,



of key areas as part of what has been called the “emergent tradition”—a tradition that “rejects politics as statecraft and envisions the church as a concrete public, political space in its own right.”<sup>9</sup>

Here I want to identify the key dimensions of Yoder’s contributions to Canadian Mennonite political theology, beginning with his reading of the Old Testament, which centers on what he calls “the diaspora vision” originating in the Abrahamic call and culminating especially in the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah (an “antiroyal” reading).<sup>10</sup> This reading signals Yoder’s interest in how Israel and, subsequently, Christian believers find their place in society as pilgrims, exiles, or resident aliens. Yoder’s reading of the New Testament focuses on the cross of Jesus Christ. He maintains that Jesus led a life that challenged the powers that be, which led to his being crucified as a political criminal. The resurrected Christ calls into existence a church community that is to live according to this cruciform pattern; Yoder calls this “the politics of Jesus.” Yoder insists that a close study of the narrative account of the Gospels will reveal a social ethic for Christians today, and not a way of ignoring or relativizing Jesus’ message and life. This narrative will not allow a focus on the cross to be pushed into the realm of pastoral care, other-worldly irrelevance, or irresponsibility. It is the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute force, that determine the meaning of history. The triumph of right is assured because of the power of the resurrection, not because of any other calculus. Thus “the relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.”<sup>11</sup>

Yoder sees the church community as paradigmatic in incarnating the logic of cross and resurrection; the order of the faith community constitutes

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1972); 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). Most of Yoder’s work appeared in the form of essays, some of which were subsequently anthologized by editors, or collected and published as books by Yoder himself. Countless secondary sources in the form of essays, dissertations, books, chapters, and articles directly engage his work.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bell, Jr., “State and Civil Society,” in *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 433.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this “anti-royal” reading, see Paul G. Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in John Howard Yoder and Oliver O’Donovan* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2010), 36-50.

<sup>11</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 232.

a public offer to all of society. The church is a vision of the kingdom come, but there is no separate authorization for secular society, which has a mandate from God to provide space for the church to fulfill its mission.<sup>12</sup> That ecclesial mission is shaped, in Yoder's view, by apocalyptic and prophetic literature that strike down our confidence in system-immanent causal explanations, either for the past or for the future, that are based on human decisions. Yoder sees Christendom as an era of the church's unfaithful acquiescence to the temptations of secular power, a time of formation of a specious symbiotic relationship between the church and secular power—a phenomenon he labels "Constantinianism."<sup>13</sup> Finally, his political theology leads him to reject killing and war in favor of pacifism, although he engages the Just War tradition seriously in calling it to be honest to its own best impulses. Pacifism is not a principle that Yoder is committed to apart from his understanding of discipleship, nor does it lead him to withdrawal from the world. He does not begin with pacifism and then seek to justify it theologically. Rather, his theological understandings lead him to pacifism.

In sum, Yoder's work might be described as a theological reframing of political responsibility in a messianic, cruciform, apocalyptic mode.<sup>14</sup>

### **Reimer's Call for "More Honesty"**

Yoder's body of work (both its content and its method) has deeply influenced Canadian Mennonite political theology, thanks to its nearly uncritical embrace; its broad dissemination through teaching and scholarship; its being generative of material for further exploration in directions and situations not explicitly addressed by Yoder; and, in fewer instances, its serving as a foil to those who resist some dimensions of his work and warn of its inherent dangers. As a way of displaying some of these dynamics, I turn now to A. James Reimer, whose political theology is, among other things, an effort to move beyond Yoder.

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<sup>12</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy Geddert (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003). See especially the essay "The State in the New Testament."

<sup>13</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See especially "The Constantinian Sources of Western Ethics," 135-47.

<sup>14</sup> I have dealt with these and other themes in Yoder's political theology in Doerksen, *Beyond Suspicion*.

Reimer's theologically conceptualized political theology can be described as "a theopolitical project that will serve as an alternative Anabaptist vision to that of John Howard Yoder, whose work Reimer has often criticized even while acknowledging its importance . . . [I]t might also be accurate to say that Reimer is seeking to provide what he considers a more orthodox version of *The Politics of Jesus*. . . ."<sup>15</sup> Reimer focuses on the necessity for those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to take seriously not only the biblical-Trinitarian foundations for all Christian social ethics but also the importance of astute, faithful engagement by Christians in public-institutional life, including the political realm.<sup>16</sup> He understood himself to be working as a Mennonite, but not limited by that tradition or beholden to take only its sources into account.

My concern here is to recognize the constructive nature of Reimer's work. Reimer intended to develop a fully conceptualized political theology, one that was to be fully conceptualized in its *theological* dimensions:

I urge Mennonites and others in the Historic Peace Church tradition to overcome their frequently dishonest disjunction between abstract theories of pacifism and non-resistance, on the one hand, and the way they actually live within civil society, on the other. I am . . . encouraging us to be honest: not to use high-sounding theological and moral rhetoric to (1) ideologically disguise the situation in which we actually find ourselves in our family, professional, business, political, civil, and church lives; nor (2) selectively read the Bible and history, undervaluing the positive mandate for institutional life found in the biblical narrative as well as in our own Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage. . . . Whether we like it or not, we occupy a space in the large world. All of us are citizens and carry passports of one country or another (some carry two), and unapologetically draw on the benefits that such citizenship

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<sup>15</sup> Paul G. Doerksen, "Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology," in Jeremy Bergen, Paul Doerksen, Karl Koop, eds., *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honour of A. James Reimer* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 282.

<sup>16</sup> Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 1-17.

offers. Let's be honest about this, and reflect theologically on it without ideological distortion.<sup>17</sup>

That honesty, in addition to a more positive embrace of law, freedom of conscience, civil institutions, and responsibility, calls for a careful consideration of forbearance and concord as a way of being in this world as Christians, a stance that goes beyond liberal toleration.

The calls for honesty by Yoder and Reimer address the issue of traditions—just war and Anabaptism respectively—being truthful and internally consistent. Thus Yoder encourages the just war community to be more honest about itself, its commitments, and its refusals to participate in war according to its own best lights; that is, to be consistent in living out its own historically developed criteria for participation and non-participation in wars. Reimer acknowledges the importance of such a call to honesty but turns it inward for Mennonites, calling for more honesty about the commitments and involvements in which we already participate, and thereby open the way for a more positive embrace of law and other civil institutions. In this sense, he wants our political theology to be truthful about where we find ourselves, and to recognize our embeddedness in various settings, especially as these involve the formal structures of law, electoral politics, and civil society more broadly.<sup>18</sup>

Reimer's call for honesty is of a more self-reflexive nature than Yoder's well-known appeal to a tradition to which he did not belong. Also, Reimer's call goes beyond a "realistic" assessment of Mennonite involvement in civil society. To put things differently, Reimer is interested not only in self-reflexive descriptive honesty but in investigating and understanding the truth about God's work in the world. He saw himself to be working as a Mennonite and embracing Mennonite sensibilities but, as already noted, not limited by that tradition or beholden to take only its sources into account. He was alert to the problems inherent in every kind of reductionism, especially in cases where theology is reduced to either ethics or politics. This perpetual concern resulted in investigating the theological realities that are to serve as the engine, the generative force, of political theology. Reimer was not afraid to use the language of foundation or presupposition, despite the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>18</sup> Again, see Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 1-17.

suspicion of many that such an approach—a search for foundations—has no place in theological reflection. The “honesty” displayed here is a clear recognition of current Mennonite practices and commitments, but perhaps more importantly, it also seeks to be truthful (honest) regarding theological convictions.<sup>19</sup>

### **Beyond Reimer’s Call**

Reimer’s attempt to develop a more honest Mennonite political theology was cut short by his untimely death, although his work made significant strides toward Mennonite self-reflexive honesty.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, questions have arisen in response to his project; scholars have wondered just how convincing this initiative was even if it made the laudable move of going beyond Yoder. For example, Jodie Boyer Hatlem and Douglas Johnson Hatlem have pointedly asserted that “Reimer’s theological project on law and civil society fails to demonstrate a requisite grappling with philosophical and theological conceptions of power.”<sup>21</sup> Since the putative honesty does not extend to the acknowledgement of power, Reimer has compromised the possibilities of necessary resistance to the state via a nonviolent commitment to the law, especially as outlined in the Torah, they argue.

Further, Joseph Wiebe finds Reimer’s demand for honesty curious: “Whenever Reimer gets to the point at which he must name who, exactly, needs to be more truthful, he equivocates”<sup>22</sup> and in so doing, scrubs clean and irons out the spots and wrinkles in his Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage. The result, says Wiebe, reinforces privilege while ignoring “the multitudinous voices—post-colonial, feminist, womanist, Indigenous, LGBTIQ—who have all recorded the ways in which an ‘ideal rational system of moral laws’ has

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<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to several anonymous peer-reviewers for comments on the nature of honesty under discussion here.

<sup>20</sup> As argued in Darrell Winger, “Shaping a More Honest Anabaptist Political Theology: A Consideration of the Work of A. James Reimer,” *Vision* (Winnipeg, MB) 18, no. 1 (2017): 16-26.

<sup>21</sup> Jodie Boyer Hatlem and Douglas Johnson Hatlem, “Exousiology and Torah: A Suggestion for Mennonite Political Theology with Reference to the Reimer-Yoder Divide,” *Direction* 38, no. 1 (2009): 52.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Wiebe, “Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society,” *Modern Theology* 32, no. 4 (October 2016): 675.

been terrorizing.”<sup>23</sup> Proclaiming Reimer’s cache of political concepts as tired and passé, Wiebe claims that North American Mennonites could learn from Mennonites in the global South, for example, and in so doing, seek to develop

an approach . . . both pragmatic and self-reflexive [that] would require entering into the dark waters of the past. The governments with which North American Mennonites have dealt were organized to benefit white agricultural immigrants (some of whom were Mennonite) at the expense of Indigenous land rights; Mennonite ethnoreligious identity—Mennonite theology and mode of being—is mired in previous *privilegia* with those governments. Yes, those privileges were reneged when Mennonites got too nonconformist with their language, education, and pacifism, but rather than begin here as a problem of demands for Mennonites to compromise their religious commitments to participate in public life, why not frame it as one way to recognize a shared world with their Indigenous neighbours?<sup>24</sup>

I cite Wiebe’s work as just one sample of Canadian Mennonites who are extending the desire for more honesty into areas where our political theology has been inadequately attentive or inadequately faithful. Insofar as such a charge holds true, it is encouraging to see Mennonites push harder to be ever more and even differently honest in our theological and political work. For example, it isn’t hard to identify Mennonites working as activists and scholars in areas too often ignored.

While not all these topics are as novel to Mennonites as some practitioners and thinkers make them out to be, and while the political cache on which we have drawn is not as tired and passé as has been suggested, very interesting developments are occurring on a number of key issues. Among them are involvement in peace and reconciliation efforts with Indigenous peoples; a search for renewed understanding and practices in sexual politics and in the nature of citizenship; active participation in and reflection on feminist political theory; and identifying and analyzing institutional power,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 674–76.

environmental issues, questions of race, land, and identity, colonialism, and economic justice. The last decade especially has seen a welcome proliferation of these kinds of deliberations.

### **Honesty and the Danger of the Superfluity of Mennonite Theology**

Another related development in Mennonite theology deserves our continued attention. The development I have described thus far is a shift toward an evermore self-reflexive honesty, which involves working within and acknowledging deep complicity with, and culpability for, the problematic dimensions of church and society that we are keen to address. However, this development carries with it a significant danger: “the desire to identify, inculcate, and preserve the special, unique, distinct, or distinguishing core of Anabaptism . . . inadvertently makes Mennonite theology superfluous.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Martens traces a “distillation trajectory” from Harold Bender’s identification of Anabaptism’s three essential elements to Yoder’s distillation of Christian existence into politics, and then to J. Denny Weaver’s insistence on nonviolence as the primary ethical category. Martens sees a similar tendency in the recent work of Keith Graber Miller and Stuart Murray:

[V]irtually all of their distilled convictions are anthropocentric and ethically focused; their distilled descriptions seem to assume some sort of broader theological context; their descriptions leave that broader theological context undeveloped, thereby assuming its secondary importance (at best) among Anabaptists; and all of these descriptions suggest a possible (and perhaps even probable) disconnect between Mennonite churches today and the respective depictions of Anabaptism.<sup>26</sup>

Martens’s argument is important for Mennonite political theology, which must take seriously the ever-present danger of leaving the theological dimension behind when we think that we have identified the essence of our politics, even while remaining open to changing our theology. This of

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Martens, “How Mennonite Theology Became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 150.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

course requires that Mennonites continue to search for more honesty, more truthfulness in both practice and theology.

### **Honesty and Vision**

Mennonite political theology can ill afford to leave theology behind as we face ever-increasing complexities. In a recent publication, P. Travis Kroeker refuses to render theology superfluous. He defines political theology as

a normative discourse rooted in the conviction that political crises . . . may be best accounted for with reference to theological terms . . . Messianic Political Theology in the Christian sense is committed to the claims that these terms are revealed in the messianic anointing and worship of Jesus as sovereign, in keeping with the complex theological narratives of the Bible.<sup>27</sup>

If political theology is thus understood, then our continued embrace and exploration of the Bible and theological heritage proceeds as if God matters. Political theology's dynamic reality exists as the body of Christ on pilgrimage through this world, having accepted its fundamentally exilic status, seeking an alternative imagination to that of possession and raw power, pursuing an ecclesial institutional ordering to relate itself actively and critically to all aspects of divine government which preside providentially over "all things." This might enable Mennonites, with their long-term intimate preoccupations with land and family, to become more openly and critically engaged with the ways in which these orderings are implicated in the wider "principalities and powers" of fallen created existence. It would also make it more difficult for mainstream Christian theology to marginalize the Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective as "a-political" or "sectarian."<sup>28</sup>

Acceptance of a fundamentally exilic status such as Kroeker describes is not to be construed as either a (re)turn to sectarianism, a deliberate pursuit of separation-as-faithfulness, or a refusal to acknowledge our involvement in all levels of civil society. That is, it is not a call to return to what Reimer considered to be less-than-honest Mennonite political theology. Rather,

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<sup>27</sup> P. Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. This paragraph draws heavily on Kroeker's book, especially the introduction.



Kroeker is asking for more openness and more critical engagement with society, but now in terms that seek to participate in the wider world in a manner aligned with the Messianic reality that reveals itself in apocalyptic form. In this way, embracing a fundamentally exilic status would press Mennonites to be less marginalized, less sectarian, less self-righteous, less possessive, and less pathological in pursuing the distinctive identity to which we want to cling.

The drive for honesty in political theology is currently being pursued beyond accurate descriptions of practice and a commitment to truthfulness. Without leaving the initiatives behind, we must be honest about how our practices and beliefs may serve as expressions and ends that are or are not unwittingly and unintentionally oppressive of some people or groups, or that cause damage in other ways. Perhaps here the language of *honesty* may be supplemented and enriched by the language of *vision*, of seeing clearly in order to discover or uncover blind spots concerning our practices and beliefs.

Recent responses to Kroeker bring these dynamics nicely into view, as is evident in a recent book symposium on work by Kroeker and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert.<sup>29</sup> In her response to these Canadian political theologians, Mennonite theologian Nancy Bedford turns to the language of vision in response to Hiebert's project, in order to interrogate further political theologies that do not see certain dimensions of reality even though they purport to be "trustworthy lenses" for looking at it.<sup>30</sup> She identifies two blind spots in North American political theology in which Mennonites are implicated, namely coloniality and the effect of any given political theology on the lives of women. Bedford pointedly asks, "What is it about a particular theopolitics that so readily closes its eyes to the way bodies of concrete human beings—for instance, young women—are treated by (usually male) theologians or other academics who claim to speak for peace?"<sup>31</sup> Further, in response to Kroeker's emphasis on incarnation in his political theology, she warns that "to commit to an incarnational or embodied, particular,

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<sup>29</sup> P. Travis Kroeker and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, eds., "Political Theology and Apocalyptic," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 274-306.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy Bedford, "To See and Inhabit," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 278.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

and faithful way of being in the world means figuring out how to do so honestly, meeting head-on the ways in which our traditions (e.g., Mennonite traditions) may have become distorted, unfaithful—indeed, disincarnate.”<sup>32</sup>

I am under no illusion that Kroeker’s particular work will save us (and Kroeker is careful to make no such claim; after all, an important dimension of the entire project is dispossession). However, his vision of a messianic posture rooted in renouncing the possessive desire pervading all aspects of human life—in the household, the academy, and the world—presses us to consider current issues in light of the overriding claim that God is sovereign, “a claim that subverts any merely human claim to sovereignty and political authority.”<sup>33</sup> Then, to have that dispossession, messianic, apocalyptic, and exilic vision subjected to incisive, constructive, critical questions pressing for recognition of dangers and blind spots—to bear witness to this process—suggests that Canadian Mennonites are perhaps moving toward the more honest political theology for which Reimer (and others) hoped.

### Conclusion

It is not easy to accept the subversion of human claims to sovereignty and political authority, especially when we find ourselves in positions to make those very claims. Indeed, to be presented with the possibility of exercising some level of sovereignty and authority brings in its train the temptation to interpret such opportunity as a gift from God, a time to claim what has been denied us for too long in too many times and places. Here we must keep in mind what Christian theology has to say politically, which differs from asking what it has to say to politics. To be more honest, to see more clearly, calls for clarity regarding our already involved (and complicit) status in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 282. As part of the same symposium, Elizabeth Phillips states that she feels like an outsider, like a woman listening to a conversation between men, for men. Her appeal to Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert is that they and others in the field “must work harder to choose to seek out, listen to, and engage with voices, experiences, and scholarship of women and others excluded from these conversations, both historical and contemporary.” Elizabeth Phillips, “Apocalyptic, Anabaptism, and Political Theology,” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 288. Both Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert acknowledge the legitimacy of her critique. See Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert, eds., “Political Theology and Apocalyptic,” 299–300, 302.

<sup>33</sup> Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, 17.

wider civil society and its institutions, as Reimer argued. We are also called in perpetuity to humbly seek to recognize our own blind spots, including our separating practice from theology. To be honest in these ways suggests that it is not enough to largely accept the way things are, or to be satisfied with occasionally sprinkling faith onto what remains an essentially secular imagination.<sup>34</sup> Put another way, Mennonite political theology in Canada is not primarily called to wrestle the current political reality into a shape suitable to our political authority. Rather, we would do well to cultivate, with honesty, an alternative imagination generated through humble faith in God, in whom our hope and trust is placed.

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<sup>34</sup> Harry Huebner, "The Nation: Beyond Secular Politics," in Bergen, et al., *Creed and Conscience*, 258.

# **The Mennonite Peacemaker Myth: Reconciliation without Truth-Telling?**

*Melanie Kampen*

## **ABSTRACT**

White settler Mennonites in Canada are widely recognized for their commitment to peace work and have led several initiatives to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. However, Mennonites in Canada have not compiled documentation on their own involvement in Indian Residential Schools, as requested of churches in Call to Action 59 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Based on an investigation of archival materials from Mennonite missionaries and employing critical race theories, this article examines the discordance between Mennonite commitment to reconciliation and the neglect of truth-telling about their own tradition regarding Indian Residential Schools.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established in 2008 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) in order to provide a space for survivors of Indian Residential Schools to share their experiences in schools operated by Christian churches and the Canadian government, and for these institutions to be held accountable for their role in cultural genocide.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the TRC produced its final report, which includes 94 Calls to Action, two of which are specifically addressed at

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<sup>1</sup> “Cultural genocide” includes the following elements as stated in Article 8 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): “1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture. 2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities; (b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources; (c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights; (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration; (e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them.” *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2008), 5. [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

churches. In this article I will focus on number 59:

We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that *their* respective congregations learn about *their church's role in colonization*, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.”<sup>2</sup>

During the TRC's process, churches across denominations worked to retrieve archival materials and compile comprehensive reports on their involvement in the Residential schools. When I read the final report, I was surprised to learn that Mennonites, specifically those who operated Poplar Hill Residential School in Ontario, were included in the IRSSA.<sup>3</sup> Until then, whenever I had inquired to Mennonite church leaders about Mennonite involvement in residential schools, I was assured that we were not involved.

What are the politics of this discordance? Why haven't prominent white settler Mennonite<sup>4</sup> groups, regardless of denomination or geographical location, compiled a report on their involvement in residential schools, whether through the establishment and operation thereof or through the contribution of financial supports and volunteers? A brief search of the past decade of articles in national Mennonite magazines such as the *Canadian Mennonite* reveals the efforts of some Mennonite churches to engage in solidarity work with Indigenous peoples and education on the residential schools in general, but these pieces only briefly mention those operated by Mennonites from the US and Canada. Why are some white settler Mennonites engaging in reconciliation and denouncing the Doctrine of

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<sup>2</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). [https://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](https://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf); my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> The IRSSA is the largest class action settlement in Canadian history. With a budget of \$60 million, the establishment of the TRC was one of the elements put in place through the IRSSA for the Canadian government to acknowledge the harms of the residential schools and to provide financial compensation and support to survivors and their families.

<sup>4</sup> I employ “white settler Mennonite” in a similar way that feminist scholarship uses the social category of “men” to talk about forms of violence related to power constructed through gender and men, and in the way critical race theory employs the category of “white people” to talk about violence related to power constructed through race and whiteness.

Discovery, for example, but not naming and examining the theological and social norms of traditions that contributed to the harms perpetrated by Mennonites in residential schools? These are among the questions that propelled my research. I contend that white settler Mennonites in Canada have jumped too hastily into efforts toward solidarity and reconciliation (i.e., peacemaking) and have barely begun the truth-telling aspect of the TRC. This undermines the work of solidarity because it is deceitful and disingenuous, whether intended that way or not.

### **Assumptions and Methods of This Study**

This article takes a first step in addressing Call to Action 59. I begin by reflecting on how Mennonite involvement in residential schools haunts us.<sup>5</sup> The frameworks of haunting and spectrality that I use provide a way to speak about voices and experiences that are silenced in Mennonite discourses but continue to interrupt dominant narratives, questioning and challenging their legitimacy. I suggest that white settler Mennonite peace theology in North America is largely haunted by the avoidance of our involvements in residential schools, and that therefore our efforts at reconciliation are haunted by shirking our responsibility in truth-telling. I examine the correspondence of Mennonite missionaries in Ontario, and employing the work of critical race theorists I identify some of their paternalistic and racist attitudes. Finally, to begin charting the dynamics of discordance between efforts at reconciliation and avoidance of truth-telling, I draw on Paulette Regan's notion of "the peacemaker myth,"<sup>6</sup> which resonates with Mennonite theological commitments to peace and nonviolence.

While there are significant historical differences between the white settler Mennonites in Canada and those who came from the US for missionary work, I address Mennonites collectively for specific methodological purposes. My premise is that all white settler Mennonites in North America

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<sup>5</sup> When I use "us" and "we," I am referring to membership of diverse white settler Mennonites in North America within a common denomination. I recognize that there are significant historical, geographical, social, and theological differences even among Caucasian Mennonites in Canada and the US. I take self-identification as a Mennonite to be a sufficient definition of "Mennonite" for the purposes of this article.

<sup>6</sup> Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver, BC: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 2010).

are involved in social relations of power and benefit from racial privileges. In 2010 Mennonite Church Canada resolved to acknowledge “that destructive individual attitudes, such as paternalism, racism, and superiority are still present among us, [and that] we as Mennonite Church Canada congregations and as individuals will seek renewed opportunities to walk with Aboriginal people of Canada, opening our hearts, minds, and ears to engage the pain resulting from the legacy of the Residential Schools.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Living Hope Native Ministries (formerly Northern Lights Gospel Mission, an organization that operated three residential schools in Ontario) issued an apology to survivors acknowledging harms done:

For the times when we physically inflicted pain, or added to the pain of your soul by our actions, we are sorry. For the times when we underestimated or ignored the impact on you of your separation from your family, we are sorry. For the times when our ignorance or negligence caused you to suffer additional emotional and physical pain at the hands of other students, we are sorry. For the times when school personnel were not properly screened, and when personnel were not adequately trained to relate to you in culturally appropriate ways, we are sorry. For the times that we acted as though we were culturally superior to you, we are sorry. For the ways in which we cooperated with the national plan to force your assimilation into Canadian society, we are sorry.<sup>8</sup>

All white settler Mennonites are complicit in the racism and paternalism perpetuated by settler colonialism in Canada. When these forms of oppression are linked with certain theological commitments and socio-ethical practices, forms of violence both within Mennonite communities and in relation to Indigenous peoples go largely unchallenged. I seek to begin to interrogate dominant Mennonite theo-ethics (i.e., narrow definitions of peace and violence) by drawing on missionary correspondence and critical

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<sup>7</sup> Resolution from Christian Witness Council, quoted in Deborah Froese, “Sharing the pain of the Indian Residential School Legacy,” Mennonite Church Canada: <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/releases/2010/07/Release14.htm>, accessed March 19, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Living Hope Native Ministries, “Truth and Reconciliation,” <https://www.lhnm.org/truth-and-reconciliation/>, accessed July 29, 2019.

social theories. This methodological choice accounts for my decision not to focus on historical differences between various Mennonite groups. Indeed, as Edith von Gunten, former co-director of Native Ministries at Mennonite Church Canada, has noted, while Mennonite Church Canada did not operate residential schools, “[i]n the eyes of the general public, ‘a Mennonite is a Mennonite’ and there are no distinctions between geographical locations or denominational affiliation.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Haunting**

*There was something else in the room with us.* That was the feeling I had walking through the Mohawk Institute Residential School in the Haudenosaunee territory that Canada refers to as Brantford, Ontario. I had it again when looking through archives of yearbooks from the Mennonite-operated Poplar Hill Residential School—a feeling that there is more than meets the eye. This is the feeling of being haunted.<sup>10</sup> As a first-generation white settler Mennonite in Manitoba, I am haunted by the participation of my people in the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples of the land we settled on. For years as the TRC unfolded, I inquired of Mennonite church leaders about our involvement. I was told that while we settled on stolen land, we were ignorant of the dispossession that made this possible,<sup>11</sup> and our involvement wasn’t nearly as bad as that of other churches. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being haunted. Thus, my research began with my situated experience and social location. However, it did not start with just a feeling but rather with a hermeneutic of suspicion cultivated through feminist theory and theology, and critical social theories—the knowledge that things are not always what they seem, that narratives are invested in securing specific identities, relations, and futures, and that there is something at stake in every discourse.

Avery Gordon writes that “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.”<sup>12</sup> This feeling led me to investigate what

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<sup>9</sup> Froese, “Sharing the pain of the Indian Residential School Legacy.”

<sup>10</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> By “we” I refer to white settler Mennonites and the social power that people inhabiting these social locations hold.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.



it is “in the room with us.” In many ways my research followed ghosts: tracking thin threads, footnotes, and secondhand conversations, and leafing through archival documents to decipher traces of truth between dense lines of church documents and correspondence filled with respectability politics and administrative jargon. How does one situate a specter of colonialism in the din of “settler futurity”?<sup>13</sup> As Gordon explains:

Following ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter memory, for the future.<sup>14</sup>

What dominant narratives circulate in Mennonite memories? What narratives, theological virtues, and ethical norms are remembered and recirculated in the Mennonite socio-theological imaginary? What are the narratives of truth and reconciliation? What are the absent presences, the specters? These are questions we must consider if we allow ourselves to be haunted by our role in the violence of settler colonialism.

### **Mennonites and Indian Residential Schools**

The church denominations that operated residential schools were Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, United, Baptist, and “a Mennonite ministry [that] operated three schools in northwestern Ontario in the 1970s and 1980s.”<sup>15</sup> The Mennonite-operated school named in the TRC final report

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<sup>13</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. These authors use “settler futurity” to refer to how both structures and interpersonal relations of power are invested in securing the future of settlers over that of Indigenous peoples.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, 56. [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring\\_the\\_Truth\\_Reconciling\\_for\\_the\\_Future\\_July\\_23\\_2015.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf)

is Poplar Hill Residential School, which operated from 1962 to 1989.<sup>16</sup> The report states that “Schools run by the Mennonite or Anabaptist community of churches were added to the Settlement Agreement after it came into force.”<sup>17</sup> It includes a statement signed by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, Brethren in Christ Canada, Mennonite Church Canada, Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, and Mennonite Central Committee Canada.<sup>18</sup>

As already noted, Mennonite organizations in Canada have not submitted a comprehensive report of their involvement in residential schools to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). This is in part because the aforementioned conferences of Mennonites themselves did not operate such schools and the three schools in Ontario (including Poplar Hill) were operated by Mennonite missionaries from the US. Overall, Mennonites from both countries operated, funded, and volunteered at three residential schools in northwestern Ontario (Poplar Hill, Stirland Lake, and Crystal Lake), two day schools in Manitoba (Pauingassi and Bloodvein), and Montreal Lake Children’s Home in Timber Bay, Saskatchewan.

The three Ontario residential schools were operated under the auspices of Northern Lights Gospel Mission (NLGM), an organization founded by Irwin and Susan Schantz, Mennonite missionaries from Pennsylvania. NLGM established their headquarters in Red Lake Ontario in 1952.<sup>19</sup> Here I want to give a sense of the attitudes with which white settler Mennonite missionaries approached Indigenous peoples. The first excerpt, published in the NLGM newsletter to constituents and supporters, contains a missionary’s assessment of the convertibility of Indigenous peoples at Flag Island:

We find three distinctive classes of people here among the people of the bush. [. . .]

*First Class.* These are our elder people from the forties on up. In appearance there is little difference from the rest of the tribe. But their thinking is anything but rational. They have been modeled in the days of the medicine man. [. . .]

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 393-95.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Horst, *A Brief History of Northern Lights Gospel Mission* (Canada: NLGM, 1977), 5.

*Second Class.* These are the young braves. Friendly almost to the point of equality. [. . .] They think in terms of progress. They realize the importance of seeing their children educated. [. . .] In spiritual things they realize their old tribal traditions could not meet the needs of the hungry hearts. [. . .] Yet these minds and hearts must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. [. . .]

*Third Class.* Our hope. No wonder Jesus said, "Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me." Like clay in the hands of a potter, so are these innocent ones. Unspoiled, fallow, ready to be planted, and what a blessed privilege we have to sow the Word of God.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the evident colonial superiority complex, religious conversion and cultural assimilation through education are regarded as necessities for Indigenous peoples, and as something that the more "rational" younger people recognize and welcome, rather than a result of colonial pressure to assimilate.

Other missionaries saw some of the negative effects that assimilation efforts were having on Indigenous communities but remained entirely unself-reflexive about it. In a 1962 NLGM newsletter, David, Elva, and Lynn Burkholder wrote this from Pikangikum: "The transition from the old Indian culture to that of the white man's is being forced upon today's Indians, but not without problems of readjustment on their part."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, as Mary Horst records in her brief history of NLGM: "Technical progress and modern civilization have made definite inroads into the northern communities and this has meant improved living conditions for the Indian people. At the same time it has had an upsetting influence on their way of life, affecting particularly the young people as they try to find their place in a white man's world."<sup>22</sup>

A common thread running through the newsletters is an emphasis

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Stoll to Alvin Frey, January 1963, *Northern Lights Gospel Mission Newsletter*, NLGM fonds, Mennonite Archives of Ontario, XV-10.2 (hereafter NLGM fonds, MAO).

<sup>21</sup> David, Elva, and Lynn Burkholder, May 1962, NLGM fonds, MAO.

<sup>22</sup> Horst, *A Brief History*, 14-15.

on saving souls and spiritual warfare against traditional Indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. After a house burned down in Deer Lake, missionary Alma Halteman reflects: “Yes, we do everything humanly possible to rescue someone from a burning house. Let’s be in such earnest to save souls from eternal destruction.”<sup>23</sup> After the funeral of a six-month-old baby at Poplar Hill, Lydia Hochstedler wonders: “The grief stricken parents have had this experience three times. Why don’t they turn to the Lord? We must pray more!”<sup>24</sup> Missionaries Paul and Mary Stoll request intercessory prayers through their letter from Lake of the Woods: “We have a tremendous burden for the lost here especially the Indian people. Please pray for us and with us for a harvest of souls.”<sup>25</sup> Norman and Dorothy Schantz, missionaries at Grassy Narrows, conclude that “[t]his past year three Indian men died, because they were taken captive by Satan at his will, supposedly by a curse. . . . intercession could change these conditions.”<sup>26</sup> David King wrote from Grassy Narrows, asking supporters to “continue to pray for the work and ministry among the Indian people. Prayer is a very vital but little used weapon in our warfare against Satan.”<sup>27</sup>

In these letters, the writers express a strong connection between salvation and suffering, i.e., suffering occurs when one turns away from God but is relieved through salvation. Ralph and Tillie Halteman at North Spirit Lake express the causal perspective on sin and suffering this way: “The Bible says the heart is wicked, so if [the Indigenous people] would give their lives over to the Lord Jesus who delivers them from sin, the heart trouble would flee. These people have a religion that does not deliver them from sin, therefore the heart trouble will continue.”<sup>28</sup> Beatrice Benner from Grassy Narrows reflects a similar attitude: “Then God looked upon all His other sheep still outside the safety of His fold. His heart ached for them as the grouped and stumbled about. He saw them yielding again and again to strong drink. He permitted the disabling of their transportation vehicles to and from

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<sup>23</sup> Alma Halteman, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>24</sup> Lydia Hochstedler, January 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>25</sup> Paul and Mary Stoll, March 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>26</sup> Norman and Dorothy Schantz, March 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>27</sup> David King, April 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>28</sup> Ralph and Tillie Halteman, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

town, sickness, and close calls to death, to remind them of His sovereignty.”<sup>29</sup> One letter even suggests prayer as a solution to domestic abuse: “In need of your prayers: [For] Sister Annie, for a forgiving spirit. Her husband Charlie, for victory in controlling his temper, and to show love instead of wrath.”<sup>30</sup> Theologically, these letters portray Mennonite missionaries as the source of hope for Indigenous peoples. The emphasis on conversion to Christianity partnered with the Mennonites’ racism and paternalism is striking but not surprising, given the history of residential schools documented by survivors and other churches.

Throughout their work in Indigenous communities, missionaries were highly regarded by their constituencies. Like their international counterparts, they were seen as going directly into the “heart of darkness,” sacrificing their comfortable lives in order to “rough it” in the wilderness in faithfulness to Jesus.<sup>31</sup> Still today, in my own white settler Mennonite circles, those missionaries deemed more culturally sensitive than others are idealized as exemplary disciples of Jesus. Overall, however, the missionary work, whether culturally sensitive or overtly paternalistic, depends on a notion of superiority—the assumption that white Christians have something that Indigenous peoples do not have and that it is something they need, namely to be saved from eternal hell. For the missionaries this assumption is displayed primarily through a notion of benevolence, which I will return to later.

### **The Mennonite “Race to Innocence”<sup>32</sup>**

When I talk about my research with other white settler Mennonites, I receive a mixture of responses—usually surprise, incredulity, curiosity, and sometimes disdain. The most common response is, “I didn’t know Mennonites ran residential schools.” This suggests a mixture of naiveté, ignorance, negligence, and defensiveness in addressing our complicity in Canada’s colonial violence. Although many white settler Mennonites

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<sup>29</sup> Beatrice Benner, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>30</sup> William Moyer and family, January 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

<sup>31</sup> Horst, *A Brief History*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, “The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women,” *The Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* (1998): 335–52.

across Canada who attended national TRC events and churches at local and conference levels have taken steps to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, by and large it is not evident that we recognize ourselves as perpetrators of the violence associated with the settler-colonialism of Mennonite-operated residential schools. Neil Funk-Unrau merely mentions Mennonite involvement in residential schools and Mennonite colonization of Manitoba in his chapter “Small Steps Toward Reconciliation: How do we get there from here?” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*.<sup>33</sup> Mennonite Church Canada published three special issues of *Intotemak* including important reflections, confessions, and calls to responsibility. Mennonite-operated residential and day schools, however, are strangely not mentioned.<sup>34</sup> Where are the truth-telling aspects of “truth and reconciliation”?

In a recent article in the *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Anthony Siegrist provides a detailed overview of NLGM’s missionary work in Ontario, drawing on some of the same archival sources as I have used. Unfortunately, he avoids making moral claims about Mennonite complicity in the violence of settler colonialism, focusing instead on his conclusion that “reducing the lives of all involved [in the residential schools] to either passive victims or malevolent perpetrators is a political act more than a historical reality.”<sup>35</sup> What Siegrist fails to recognize is the politics of this statement itself. In this case, the pursuit of nuance—distinguishing between politics and history—avoids wrestling with how Mennonite involvement in residential schools haunts us. Emphasizing nuanced perspectives on violent histories benefits the victors—those already holding the most social power. Writing history is always a political act.

<sup>33</sup> Neil Funk-Unrau, “Small Steps Toward Reconciliation: How do we get there from here?” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> *Wrongs to Rights: How Churches Can Engage the United Nations Declaration 75-84 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, special Issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016); *Yours, Mine, Ours: Unravelling the Doctrine of Discovery*, special Issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Cheryl Woelk and Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016); *Quest for Respect: The Church and Indigenous Spirituality*, special issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Jeff Friesen and Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Siegrist, “Part of the Authority Structure’: An Organizational History of Mennonite Indian Residential Schools in Ontario,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no.1 (January 2019): 38.

Although the lack of knowledge about Mennonite involvement in residential schools is surprising, it is not unique to white settler *Mennonites* in North America. Whiteness and settler colonialism is something European Mennonites share with the rest of Euro-American society. As critical theorist Sara Ahmed has observed, “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it.”<sup>36</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo observe that “being perceived as White carries more than a mere racial classification. It is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others.”<sup>37</sup> White settler Mennonites benefit from the same social rights and privileges as other white settlers in Canada and the US. Sometimes described by Mennonite historians as an ethnic minority, many Mennonite refugees and immigrants—with their protestant work ethic and European social norms—assimilated to a North American culture of whiteness more easily than refugees and immigrants of color. White settler Mennonite attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and the “Other” more broadly were, and still are, more deeply aligned with white settler society than often acknowledged.

Sensoy and DiAngelo define racism in North America as “White/settler racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, and used to the advantage of Whites and the disadvantage of peoples of Color.”<sup>38</sup> While there are historical, theological, and social differences, for example, between Russian-German Mennonites in Manitoba and Swiss Mennonites from the US operating in northwestern Ontario, understanding how elements of settler colonialism—such as racism, sexism, classism, and

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<sup>36</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007): 157.

<sup>37</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2017), 122. For critical race theories see Sherene Razack, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, W.E.B. Du Bois, Wendy Fletcher and Cathy Hogarth, and Andrea Smith. For theologians and ethicists who address the interlocking oppressions of Christian theology, settler-colonialism, and/or racism, see Traci West, Emilie Townes, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, Andrea Smith, Laura Donaldson, James Cone, J. K. Carter, Willie Jennings, Robert Warrior, George Tinker, and Vine Deloria Jr.

<sup>38</sup> Sensoy and DiAngelo, 119.

paternalism—operate across Euro-American Mennonites allows us to see patterns of oppression that are otherwise overlooked.

A common temptation is to reach for stories of good relationships between Mennonites and Indigenous peoples in order to save face and to serve as counter-narratives to settler-colonial violence. Consider these examples: “My friend is Indigenous, so I’m not racist,” or “My church didn’t run a residential school,” or “I went to this reservation once and they said they liked the Mennonites.” Sensoy and DiAngelo counsel against the use of such anecdotal evidence: “[f]ocusing on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences prevents us from seeing the overall, societal patterns. While there are always exceptions to the rule, exceptions also illustrate the rule. [. . .] But the historical, measurable, and predictable evidence [in this case given by the TRC] is that this is an atypical occurrence.”<sup>39</sup> Following their lead, I encourage white settler Mennonites, myself included, to take up the practice of examining patterns as a crucial guide to engaging critical social analysis and understanding oppression. This practice is critical for truth-telling, social justice, and healing.

In 2010, *Canadian Mennonite’s* August 16 issue covered the opening TRC events in Winnipeg, Manitoba.<sup>40</sup> This issue was mailed to approximately 14,336 Mennonite homes and churches.<sup>41</sup> Four correspondents covered the event well, and named each of the Mennonite-operated residential and day schools, and gave a brief overview.<sup>42</sup> Somehow this knowledge had been lost amid the din of searching through church records and having national conversations about the TRC. Even diligent readers of *Canadian Mennonite* seem to have forgotten this part of our history; the frequency of ignorance of Mennonite involvement in residential schools that I encountered in

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12. They add: “Focusing on the exceptions also precludes a more nuanced analysis of the role these exceptions play in the system overall.”

<sup>40</sup> *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Circulation numbers provided by Lisa Jacky, *Canadian Mennonite*, personal correspondence October 17, 2018. At time of writing there were approximately 200,000 Mennonites in Canada.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn Rempel Petkau, “How complicit are Mennonites in Residential School Abuse?” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 4-7; Janet Plenert, “A first step towards healing,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 8-9; Deborah Froese, “MC Canada shares the pain of Indian Residential School legacy,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 9, 11; Rachel Bergen, “With God, all things are possible,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 11-12.



my research was unexpected. For some reason, our involvement was not committed to collective memory amidst engagement with the TRC.

Perhaps it is easier for white settler Mennonites to point to the atrocities committed by Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist residential schools, since these have been the focus of the TRC and national efforts to educate about such schools. For example, a Mennonite church staff member once told me that our involvement was “not as bad” as that of other church denominations. This sense of “we were not as bad” establishes a hierarchy of innocence. Others insist on nuancing discussions of Mennonite contributions to the harms of settler colonialism by focusing on how Mennonite residential schools did try to support Indigenous identity. This is akin to asking that discussions on harms of the slave trade include discussions of “good” slave owners to provide a balanced perspective. Behind the desire for nuance is “the race to innocence,” rather than a willingness to let ourselves be haunted.

Indeed, Mennonite missionaries among Indigenous peoples in Canada are consistently portrayed by church leaders and constituents as more culturally sensitive than our denominational counterparts, and even radical for their time. However, in my experience in Mennonite churches, communities, and schools, I have noticed that prejudiced and racist views are prevalent. A common attitude is: “We came here as refugees with nothing and we made it, why can’t you?” This attitude arises from a fundamental attribution error: judging others by attributing behavior only to character contributes to the discriminatory systems of power that disenfranchised Indigenous people in the first place. Instead of responding with empathy to their trauma and suffering, many Mennonites respond defensively and judgmentally. This is counterintuitive, given the significance of suffering in white settler Mennonites’ collective memory.

Solidarity between people who experience different forms of oppression often fails because of “competing marginalities.” Sometimes when a group of people advocate for social change, they perceive other advocating groups as competition, even barriers to achieving their own aspirations for change. Groups can produce hierarchies of oppression, each vying for the position of most oppressed, most innocent, and therefore most legitimate in their appeal. This is “the race to innocence.” At best these “additive oppressions”

merely lead to an impasse, but at worst they perpetuate harm. Sherene Razack and Mary Louise Fellows draw on an alternative framework of interlocking oppressions that covers “relationships among hierarchical oppressions,” and highlights how “systems of oppression come to existence in and through one another so that class exploitation could not be accomplished without gender and racial hierarchies; imperialism could not function without class exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism, and so on.”<sup>43</sup>

The race to innocence functions in dominant Mennonite narratives. First, prominent historical accounts and autobiographies of Mennonites during the Soviet era in Russia position Mennonites as innocent victims of a mercurial communist regime. While the Stalin era must certainly be condemned, only a handful of Mennonites have begun accounting for their own social location on the Ukrainian Steppes as settlers, some as wealthy landowners who exploited local peasants on their estates. Secondly, by focusing on certain forms of violence (military violence and state power) and certain forms of peacemaking (conscious objection, nonviolent direct action), Mennonites have neglected forms of violence in their own communities—the ways they are both contributors to peace and justice as well as perpetrators of violence, especially sexual violence and the silencing of survivors. This is well documented by such scholars as Marlene Epp, Carol Penner, Lydia Harder, Stephanie Krehbiel, Jay Yoder, and Hilary Scarscella. Thirdly, both Mennonite men and women produced a hierarchy with regard to Soviet Mennonite refugee women, who were seen as morally corrupt and therefore inferior (an example of sexism and misogyny). Finally, the ways Mennonites have perpetuated racist attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and participated in their cultural genocide have largely been ignored under the guise of innocence and through the legitimization of missionary work. The letters of Mennonite missionaries in Poplar Hill and other Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario attest to this.

### **Mennonites and Call to Action 59**

Throughout the 20th century, white settler Mennonites valued peace in response to suffering and violence, defined variously from nonresistance to nonviolent direct action. On the spectrum of dominant peace theologies,

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<sup>43</sup> Fellows and Razack, “The Race to Innocence,” 335.

however, peace and violence are consistently defined within a church-world dualism such that the church is never seen as a perpetrator but only as a witness to an alternative way of being in a violent world. As Mennonite feminist theologians have demonstrated, this has prevented us from addressing violence in our churches and families, and against Indigenous people.

The TRC has challenged churches to recognize their role in maintaining the structures of settler colonialism, their hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies, and their theological and ethical norms. Some churches have begun the self-reflexive work. However, their primary focus has been collecting and submitting records, and issuing official apologies. Few have taken up the Calls to Action directed specifically at churches, which would require significant changes in theologies, ethics, collective memories, education, and attention to our own histories of trauma and internal abuses of power. Perhaps we are so hesitant to attend to the specters in our archives because in the western literary imagination, ghosts are often portrayed as malevolent victims of violence seeking revenge. Perhaps we fear that we will be held accountable for our actions and for the benefits we enjoy from the actions of our forebears. However, this is the risk truth-telling requires.

### **Mennonites in Canada's Peacemaker Myth**

Settler colonialism in the United States is often characterized as wild, lawless, and filled with mass removal of Indigenous people from their lands (e.g., the Trail of Tears) and outright massacres of entire villages (e.g., Wounded Knee, Sand Creek). By contrast, settler colonialism in Canada has narrated itself as peaceful, benevolent, generous, and orderly. Indeed, Canadian government treaties could be seen as the paragon of "benevolent" conquest, portrayed as peaceful, civilized discussions followed by unanimous agreement of terms. As historian William H. Katerberg points out, the Canadian mounted police, a prominent symbol of national identity, are "'keepers of the Queen's peace.' As such, they personify 'Canadian law and order – defined in the British North America Act by the motto 'peace, order, and good government' – [which] effectively forestalled the culture of gunplay and violence typical of the American West and its ideal, 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> William H. Katerberg, "A Northern Vision: Frontier and the West in the Canadian and

But in reality, while Canada's colonization is differentiated from that of the US in some ways, it was also violent, as witness the Seven Oaks Massacre, the North-West Rebellions, and the execution of Louis Riel.<sup>45</sup> From more recent history, I would add land reclamation efforts at Oka, Ipperwash, and Caledonia, and the Highway of Tears in British Columbia, plus residential and day schools, and mission work in Indigenous communities.

As historian Richard Slotkin explains, the myth of Canada as a peacemaker is effective because “[t]he *moral* and political imperatives implicit in the myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent human beings. . . . [Myths transform] secular history into a body of sacred and sanctifying legends.”<sup>46</sup> White settler Mennonites are uniquely suited to this peacemaker myth, easily assimilating into a national myth of benevolence towards its own citizens exemplified in such systems as national health care, religious and educational freedoms, an emphasis on international peacekeeping efforts, and a de-emphasis on military power (at least in comparison with the US). National heroes and sacred secular histories are replaced with the sacred texts, narratives, and martyrs that Mennonites have carried with them from place to place.

Apart from evangelical and charismatic influences among some Mennonites in North America, white settler Mennonites are generally perceived as people who profess their faith more through actions than through words. Organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Christian Peacemaker Teams are faith-based humanitarian organizations. Similarly, Mennonite Church Canada and MCC missionaries are primarily sent to aid in community services and development, with evangelism included where and when appropriate. White Mennonite missionaries in Indigenous communities are no exception to this “peaceful” approach, characterized primarily by “witness”—a theo-ethic of discipleship based on the life, death, and teachings of Jesus. They have viewed themselves as benevolent, culturally sensitive, and faithful disciples

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American Imagination,” in *One West, Two Myths II: Essays on Comparison*, eds. C. L. Higham and Robert Thacker (Calgary, AB: Univ. of Calgary Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1900* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 19; my emphasis.

following God's calling, making them ideal partners in the operation of residential and day schools, and aiding assimilation through church-funded missionary efforts.<sup>47</sup>

White settler Mennonites continue to do mission work in Indigenous communities in Canada today, usually through summer Bible camps and guest preachers. For ten years I volunteered with my church's youth group at a summer camp at Matheson Island and for three years with a different church's family camp in Pauingassi First Nation, both in Manitoba. Although we built some good relationships (from our perspective) with people in these communities and many of us found our assumptions and stereotypes challenged, we were ignorant of how our social power influenced these relationships and our work, especially theologically—something that has not yet been critically considered. In the 1990s and 2000s the paradigm of MCCanada's Indigenous Relations office changed from a "for them" to a "with them" policy. The reconceived model, called Partnership Circles, emphasizes that white settler Mennonite presence can only occur upon invitation from a community. While this is an important development, an invitation does not guarantee equal or equitable power relations, let alone truth and reconciliation. As the NLGM letters suggested, Indigenous communities who invited missionaries to educate their children did so under the duress of colonization: their way of life was being eradicated under settler colonialism and they sought to give their children a chance at surviving and thriving in the new world being imposed on them. An amendment to the Indian Act in 1920 made school attendance compulsory for Indigenous children, in stark contrast to claims by NLGM missionaries at MacDowell Lake:

Going to school is not compulsory for the Indian children, but more of them have the privilege of going to school than in times past. Some of the children can attend in the village where they live. Others leave home to go to boarding school. [. . .] Sending their children to boarding school at Poplar Hill is not an easy

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<sup>47</sup> See Henry Neufeld, "From 'never a teacher' to 'why not?' Reluctant Teacher Recalls his Indian Day School Experience," *Canadian Mennonite*, September 19, 2018, 4; Menno Wiebe, "From Bloodvien to Crosslake: A 25 Year Synthesis," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 13-24; Alvina Block, "Changing Attitudes: Relations of Mennonite Missionaries with Native North Americans 1880-2004," Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 2006.

thing for these Christian parents at MacDowell Lake. However, they realize that it is the Lord's will and for the children's good, so they are resigned to it.<sup>48</sup>

Central to the question of invitation is the question of moral agency, which can be addressed only by acknowledging social location. Only by examining the effects of social relations of power can we begin to see that invitations to settlers to operate schools or camps in Indigenous communities can be constrained by oppressive social conditions. Without critical power analysis, the Partnership Circles model risks perpetuating covert forms of settler colonialism under the guise of benevolent peacemaking. What is additionally troubling is the possibility for Canadian churches, white settler Mennonite churches and church organizations included, to absorb the TRC into the national peacemaking myth. Collecting and submitting records and offering official apologies is an important step for churches as a response to the TRC, but only a step. As Paulette Regan explains, "[t]he peacemaker myth is resilient and flexible. It is manifested today in a new discourse of reconciliation. Despite talk of reconciliation, the underlying structures and behavioural patterns of colonial violence that have shaped our relationship lie just beneath the surface."<sup>49</sup> Regan is addressing public institutions and government agencies—and churches are no exception here. Without substantive theological and structural changes, churches risk reconstituting their history of shame and guilt through their contributions to TRC into a narrative of triumph and moral superiority, thus replicating the myth of settler benevolence—and Canada's peacemaking myth.

### **Conclusion**

This article is only a step towards prodding Canadian white settler Mennonites to deeper, more critical reflection on, and engagement with,

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<sup>48</sup> Omar, Emma Mae, and Wanda Helmuth, 1962, NLGM fonds, MAO. In 1920 the Indian Act was amended to state: "The department [of Indian Affairs] is thus enabled to establish a system of compulsory education at both day and residential schools." Department of Indian Affairs Annual Report for 1920, Canada Sessional Papers, 1921. Reprinted in *Indian Residential Schools & Reconciliation: Teacher Resource Guide 11/12, Book 2* (Vancouver, BC: First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations School Association, 2015): [www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/PUB-LFP-IRS11-12-DE-Pt2-2015-07-WEB.pdf](http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/PUB-LFP-IRS11-12-DE-Pt2-2015-07-WEB.pdf), accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 109.

the ways we are haunted by our involvement in residential schools and the broader aspects of settler colonialism. My primary concern is that our work of reconciliation and solidarity is undermined by neglecting to address harms caused by our missionary involvement, both by NLGM and Mennonite volunteers. The striking discordance between upholding Mennonite peace traditions and acknowledging the violence of settler colonialism calls for greater attention. More work is needed, especially regarding the social-theological-ethical norms and commitments of white settler Mennonites in relation to missionary work in Indigenous communities. Key questions for further consideration include these: What social norms or aspects of social location contributed to understanding the operation of residential schools as discipleship or benevolence? What theological commitments or myths undergird the understanding of white settler Mennonite involvement in residential schools and missionary work? How do we let ourselves be haunted by our role in the violence of residential schools? What does accountability require with regard to truth-telling and reconciliation?

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# The Undercommons of the Church: Mennonite Political Theology against Dialogue

*Justin Heinzekehr*

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary North American Mennonite political theologians have tended to describe their projects in radical terms such as messianic, apocalyptic, differential, etc., in which creative resistance to social norms and power structures is privileged. However, their basic orientation towards the political or ecclesial community (the “commons”) remains grounded in a liberal framework, which privileges social consensus. Mennonite political theology has benefited in some ways from this orientation toward the “commons,” but has struggled to understand the radical authority that lies beyond the commons, which Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have described as the “undercommons.” This article uses Harney and Moten’s analysis of the undercommons to diagnose and re-describe Mennonite political theology.

Thereupon, the people split into two parts and, as a consequence thereof, many discussions were held with each other but no good fruit seemed to grow out of it.

—*Unknown Mennonite editor, 1694*<sup>1</sup>

A classic short film by Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer called “Dimensions of Dialogue”<sup>2</sup> is divided into three segments, each portraying a type of human communication. In the first, “Eternal Conversation,” we encounter several heads made out of food, metal, or paper products. Each head takes turns swallowing one of the others and reducing its component parts—

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Roth, *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 2002), 49.

<sup>2</sup> The film is available on multiple sites, such as Jan Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, 1983, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-0a4Yxs4YY>.



chopping up the food, crushing the metal, rotting the paper. In the end, all the heads are reduced to a primordial clay and simply regurgitate endless identical copies of each other. The second segment, “Passionate Discourse,” shows two clay lovers who, in the act of making love and then physically fighting, begin to merge limbs and bodies until they become a single pile of clay. In the third segment, “Exhaustive Discussion,” two clay heads offer each other various objects from their mouths. At first, these objects fit together: a toothbrush and toothpaste, bread and butter, a shoe and a shoelace, a pencil and a sharpener. But soon the objects are mismatched, with unfortunate results. Toothpaste is spread on bread, a shoe is sharpened, etc. In the end, both heads collapse in on themselves, panting and exhausted.

Besides its delightful use of stop-motion animation, Švankmajer’s film operates as a corrective to the privilege that dialogue enjoys in liberal political theology. The film is a disturbing, disorienting portrayal of the liberal ideal of “the commons,” in which ultimate value is found in the collective wisdom of public discourse, reconciliation, unity, or compromise. In civic terms, the commons is the space of public discourse, cosmopolitanism, or law. In ecclesial terms, it may be couched in terms of discernment or consensus. Much can be said for the power of the commons to promote basic rights and freedom, as well as a strong communal identity. Certainly, a political theology of the commons is a significant moral improvement over a theology of despotism or hierarchy. Yet, as Švankmajer’s film vividly illustrates, the commons can also be a force of homogenization and violence.

My argument is that North American Mennonite political theology, both the theoretical and the practical, has been basically liberal in its orientation to the commons despite efforts to move it in a more radical direction. Mennonite theology has enjoyed the benefits of this orientation but also suffers from its underlying falsehood, that is, the identification of the commons with moral authority. The liberal orientation is unable to address the authority that lies beyond the commons, which the commons can only access indirectly.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have described this alternative space as the “undercommons.”<sup>3</sup> Many Mennonite theologians have attempted to

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<sup>3</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

bring the undercommons to the forefront, describing their projects in such terms as messianic, apocalyptic, or differential, but the legacy of liberalism is strong and deep. At most, we have achieved only an inconsistent vacillation between a liberal and radical political theology. This article attempts to use Harney and Moten's insightful description of the undercommons to make a diagnosis (why have we failed to adequately connect Mennonite political theology to the undercommons?) and a new attempt at description (how does the undercommons affect actually existing churches?).

### Definitions and Frameworks

I use "political theology" in a fairly narrow sense. In its broadest use, political theology encompasses all theological discussions that emphasize political or social components.<sup>4</sup> This kind of political theology goes back to the earliest Christian communities and appears throughout Christian history. John Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* can be defined as a political theology in this wider sense, because it makes claims about Jesus as a model for political engagement.<sup>5</sup> I prefer to reserve the term for a more specific conversation concerned with how theological concepts become "secularized" or embodied in political power structures. This conversation could not have happened until the Enlightenment and the development of a secular space in opposition to the religious sphere, and did not begin in earnest until Carl Schmitt recognized in the 1920s that "all significant concepts of the modern

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<sup>4</sup> A broad definition is found in Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, "Preface," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), xi–xii: "an inquiry carried out by Christian theologians in relation to the political, where the political is defined broadly to include the various ways in which humans order common life." Compare this slightly more restricted definition, still broad enough to include a variety of historical streams: "Political theology is...the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social, and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world." William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, "Introduction to Second Edition," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most well-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at <http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/> and in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015).

theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>6</sup> Political theology in this narrower sense is an analysis of how theological ideas—including concepts such as sovereignty, salvation, and moral authority—function in social power structures. This analysis can take various forms from the political left or right, thinking of God as a real or fictional entity, and applying to the nation-state or other forms of political community. In any case, it focuses on how sacredness is translated and operates in social structures.

I will use three interrelated concepts from the discipline of political theology: sovereignty, the sacred, and moral authority. I follow Paul Kahn in making them essentially interchangeable. The sovereign, as Schmitt said, is what exists beyond the law and therefore grounds the law. Kahn notes that

God’s presence always precedes God’s justice – just read the book of Job. The same was true of the political sovereign. Justice is a debate about the deployment of sovereign power, not about its creation. It was not the law that created the community of Israel but the act of a sovereign God who gave the law.<sup>7</sup>

In a monarchy, the sovereign may be a person, but in the modern nation-state it is dissolved in the political body itself (popular sovereignty). The important thing is that the sovereign is the ultimate source of authority. And because the sovereign occupies this divine position, it manifests the sacred to the community and possesses ultimate moral authority. The sovereign is that which grounds and defines moral claims. Any action or decision of the sovereign is by definition moral, and no action against the sovereign can be moral. In this sense, the “secular” has either no moral authority at all or only derivative moral authority.

Finally, it is useful to have in mind a few basic ways of interpreting sovereignty. Dorothee Sölle’s framework is the one I will reference here. She separates theological frameworks into three basic camps: orthodox, liberal, and radical.<sup>8</sup> Each has a distinct way of positioning sovereignty relative to

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2008), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 21.

the political community. An orthodox political theology sees sovereignty as contained within a community but flowing downward from a single or narrow source. The monarch is the classic example, but sovereignty can also be invested in a text, as in biblical conservatism, in a small group of elders or aristocracy, or in a modern dictator, and so forth. I will mostly leave the orthodox model aside, but it has played and still plays a role in Mennonite consciousness and practice, particularly in the more conservative conferences and denominations, and seems to be on the rise in national politics in the United States and Europe.

The liberal idea of sovereignty comes from Enlightenment ideals of democracy and is the basis of the modern nation-state. Kahn describes how sovereignty operates in this context:

Once the body of the citizen becomes the immediate locus of the sovereign, the distance between the finite and the sacred has been overcome. What is required now is not the violent sacrificial act from without but the realization of the truth of the self from within – an inward turning.<sup>9</sup>

In liberal political theology, moral authority originates from and depends on the consensus of the political body. The legitimacy of political leaders is dependent on their embodying the corporate will, and they can and should be removed if they cease to represent that consensus.<sup>10</sup>

A radical political theology does not invest sovereignty within the political body but defines it as what is outside the political body's norms, assumptions, or privileges. Liberation and feminist theologies are prime examples, but so are Emmanuel Levinas's theology of the Other and Gilles Deleuze's ethics of creative experimentation. Here, both a political community and its leaders operate at most with only indirect moral authority, whose ultimate source is located in a different sphere altogether. Sölle explains the

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<sup>9</sup> Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> "Once the locus of the sovereign presence shifts, the power of the king – though not necessarily his potential for violence – has already been broken. His deployment of torture is no longer a showing forth of the divine but an abuse of power.... Once the king no longer possesses the power to sacrifice, the revolution demands that he be sacrificed to the new sovereign. He has become an idol.... This has nothing to do with secularization or the rule of law but rather with the changing locus of the sacred." Ibid., 37.

distinction well between liberal and radical political theologies:

God's preference for the poor . . . introduces an element of absoluteness. In *any* situation, God is with the poor and for the poor, with and for the tormented and oppressed in the most varied circumstances. . . . That is in no way relative, and one cannot say, "Yes, but we must also consider what becomes of the rich."<sup>11</sup>

Liberal theology is built on the assumption that moral authority comes from mutual agreement on basic principles across interests and social identities. Radical theology recognizes the remainder left after this commons is formed and makes the commons subordinate to it.

Is it possible to do away with sovereignty altogether? This is the dream of liberal politics—the post-sovereign society—which, in banishing the sacred from the public sphere, would also banish political violence. This fantasy has been thoroughly deconstructed by scholars such as Talal Asad and William Cavanaugh. Despite liberalism's efforts to reduce international relations to a purely legal framework, the logic of sovereignty prevails in a less overt form. Although no longer embodied in the national citizenry, sovereignty can now be equated with the commons of democratic cosmopolitanism, in which the "civilized" world is authorized to make necessary exceptions to international law in response to the backwardness of the "uncivilized" world.<sup>12</sup>

A similar dream sometimes makes its way into radical political theology as well. In response to the totalitarian sovereignty of Schmitt or even of liberal theorists, radical theologians may be tempted to confine sovereignty to the other two theological camps. For example, Catherine Keller uses "sovereignty" as shorthand for the logic of omnipotence and hierarchy that she wants to subvert. The implication is that a more radical eco-theology could escape sovereignty as such. But Keller actually has in mind a particular

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<sup>11</sup> Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> "Violence, I argue, is not only a continuous feature of [a liberal political community]. The absolute right to defend oneself by force becomes, in the context of industrial capitalism, the freedom to use violence globally: when social difference is seen as backwardness and backwardness as a source of danger to civilized society, self-defense calls for a project of reordering the world in which the rules of civilized warfare cannot be allowed to stand in the way." Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007), 62.

source of moral authority, just as absolute even if very different in form from the Schmittian sovereign, which she describes as “a mindfully indeterminate and interindebted collective” (the undercommons).<sup>13</sup> In one sense, it is a simple question of definition, yet accountability and clarity are gained by naming sovereignty as built into the radical tradition instead of pretending that it has been overcome.

### **What is the Undercommons?**

Sovereignty is easier to describe in liberal and orthodox political theologies, because in both it is identical to an existing thing—either embodied in a specific leader, text, or institution or expressed in and through the political community. Sovereignty in the radical tradition is always difficult to define. While definitions by nature follow a logic of the commons (they seek publicly accepted and understandable terms), radical sovereignty cannot be captured by the commons. In fact, part of what is missing from Mennonite political theology is an adequate description of the undercommons *on its own terms*.

As a representative of black critical theory, Harney and Moten’s work is significant because it attempts to express the radical absolute from the perspective of those occupying that space. In coining the term “undercommons,” they play with the idea of the colonial settlement or enclosure—space carved out from the “surround.” In the colonial mindset, the settlement is surrounded by dangerous forces of chaos and must be protected, both for self-defense and as the bastion of the civilizing influence that will eventually redeem the rest of the uncivilized space. Note the similarity to the liberal mindset above. This colonial space, the “commons,” operates through a logic of rights, interests, and regulation. There are no rights outside it because it is the ground and origin of rights. Harney and Moten call this regulatory function “politics.”<sup>14</sup> They see this same colonial logic operating in American society, and they focus on how the commons appears in the modern university: the pressure on students to take on debt

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2018), 33.

<sup>14</sup> “What’s left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common.” Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 18.

and then plug into the marketplace in order to repay it; the growing use of contingent faculty and the dispossession of the curriculum from instructors; and the privileging of critical rather than creative thinking.

There is always resistance to the hegemony of the commons. “[W]here the aim is not to suppress the general antagonism but to experiment with its informal capacity, that place is the undercommons.” It exists beyond or below the organizing social logic, which necessarily means living outside “politics” as defined above. Thus, if the undercommons is recognized at all, it will only be as irresponsibility:

An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We’re just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren’t responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can’t be represented.<sup>15</sup>

The undercommons represents a “wild beyond” out of the reach of dialogue, discussion, or consensus: “In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism.”<sup>16</sup> In short, one must refuse the entire dialogical framework offered by the commons.

The undercommons is the name for the sacred outside the definable community—the radical absolute—and comes with the moral height associated with sovereignty or sacredness.

I think what we’re gesturing towards is real. . . . It’s like a delirium (as Deleuze might say, by way of Hume) taking the form of, moving in the habit, putting on the habit, of a sovereign

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Introduction” to Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 8.

articulation, something that an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ would say. But what it is, really . . . is a relay of breath that comes from somewhere else, that seems like it comes out of nowhere.<sup>17</sup>

It contains an authoritative request, demand or call, even if it is given in the form of “multiplicity and multivocality.”<sup>18</sup> This poetic description makes the undercommons sound more complicated than it is, although it is difficult to put into words. “The undercommons, far from being a heroic figure of resistance, is the most ordinary thing.”<sup>19</sup> The undercommons of a university, for instance, might consist of the “study” that happens in informal conversations outside the curriculum, especially those excluded a priori from classroom settings—perhaps conversations that don’t fit disciplinary conventions, that make use of intuitive and subjective leaps, or that explore topics not on any syllabus.<sup>20</sup>

However, the undercommons does not simply name practices existing outside the institution. The term designates activity that cannot be recognized as legitimate (or recognized at all) because of power structures shaping the institutional discourse. In the political theology of the undercommons, sovereignty has a particular orientation and directional movement. It has an inverse relationship to dominant social structures, and therefore is directed in favor of subaltern populations and views. It exercises a “preferential option,” to borrow a term from liberation theology. As a concrete example, Moten suggests the Mississippi Freedom Schools designed during the Civil Rights Movement to provide free curriculum to black elementary and high school students. The curriculum encouraged discussion, relevance, and engagement, and was based on a positive assessment of black culture.

My point is that the Mississippi Freedom School curriculum asked a couple of questions of the people who were involved in it, both the students and the teachers. One question was: What do we not have that we need. . . ? But the other question, which is, I think, prior to the first . . . is what do we have that we want

<sup>17</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 132–33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Kris Cohen, “For and Against Critique,” open set, March 3, 2016, <http://www.open-set.com/krcohen/reviews/for-and-against-critique/>.

<sup>20</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 68.



to keep? . . . [P]art of what we want to do is to organize ourselves around the principle that we don't want everything they have."<sup>21</sup>

Politically, the Black Panthers and the Occupy movement are examples of an undercommons.<sup>22</sup> Harney talks about the undercommons of government bureaucracy, in which employees find ways to be subtly creative:

I remember once going . . . into the big post office that they later closed in downtown Manhattan. Everyone had their booth, and in lower Manhattan's post office behind almost every booth was a black or latina woman who had completely decorated the booth for herself. And it was full of, like, Mumia posters, pictures of kids, pictures of Michael Jackson, pictures of union stuff, everything. Every booth, so every time you went up, you got a different view. And I'm like, well, if these are the people who are supposed to be making an effect called the state, then, there's got to be an undercommons here too.<sup>23</sup>

More often, the undercommons might appear in very mundane things:

We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity.<sup>24</sup>

The undercommons is not primarily defined by suffering, although it can and does suffer at the hands of the commons. In contrast to the commons, undercommons activity is done for its own sake, for enjoyment, as play.<sup>25</sup>

Three characteristics of the undercommons are especially important:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 110

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 106.

(1) its basis in refusal, (2) its performative character, and (3) its collective but not abstract form. Drawing on literary critic Gayatri Spivak, Harney notes that the first “right” of the undercommons is the right to refuse rights.<sup>26</sup> For example, an NGO may intend to help a marginalized group. Its goal is to define and protect the interests of those lacking a voice, but often it has to impose, more or less subtly, some structures of the dominant framework in order to use the idea of rights at all.<sup>27</sup> The commons exerts pressure to translate ways of being together into forms that can be exploited. “I also feel that it’s necessary for us to try to elaborate some other forms that don’t take us through those political steps, that don’t require becoming self-determining enough to have a voice and have interests,” adds Harney, “and to acknowledge that people don’t need to have interests to be with each other.”<sup>28</sup> The undercommons, then, is first about refusing options laid out by the commons, including the need to be integrated into it.

One misunderstanding about the undercommons is that it is viciously relative. If sovereignty is defined as marginal to the dominant culture, are we not left immobilized by all the competing claims to marginalization, prey to endless Facebook debates, and overly earnest activists convinced that their interest group must have priority? Actually, this state of things applies only to the commons, where balancing interests, rights, and “voices” is of ultimate concern. An infinite regression of interests is a symptom of the liberal community.<sup>29</sup> Granted, the influence of the sovereignty of the undercommons might make this symptom more severe. If the discussion (this word should already be a clue) is conducted at the level of competing interests or voices, then it is an activity of the commons, not the undercommons.

This is not to say that NGO work or political activism in general should not be conducted, but to say that these activities exist in the liberal register, not the radical. By analogy, the transition from orthodox to liberal political theology does not mean that the role of political leadership is abolished or unnecessary, only that sacredness (orientation to the absolute) is transferred

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>27</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 523–81.

<sup>28</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> See Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro, “Social Networks as Dispositives of Neoliberal Governmentality,” *Journal of Media Critique* 2, no. 7 (2016): 85–102.

from the leader to the people. We still need good political leaders in liberal political theory, and good communities, good activists, and good policy in radical political theory. However, the ultimate orientation of radical theory is not toward getting everyone an equal place in the conversation, but toward making room for existence outside the standard conversation. It's about what could and does happen when people refuse the conversation.

If the existential basis of the undercommons is refusal of "politics" as such, then its mode of operation is not political or administrative but performative. It can be difficult from the perspective of the commons to accept the legitimacy of a position without "interests." The Occupy movement was criticized, for example, for not having a platform or a set of demands. But such apparent irresponsibility is not due to a lack of vision or motive. "When we say we don't want management, it doesn't mean we don't want anything, that it just sits there and everything's fine." Harney explains, "There's something to be done, but it's performative, it's not managerial."<sup>30</sup> The undercommons is the space of elaboration, improvisation, or rehearsal, not administration.

Moten recounts a ritual that he observed riding in a car with his grandfather in Arkansas in the 1960s. After giving someone a ride, the person would ask how much they owed for gas. "And he'd say, 'nothin.' . . . Sometimes he'd feign a kind of 'why would you even ask me [something] like that?'" But the debt had to be acknowledged, or else the rider would be considered rude. This everyday ritual is a way of refusing the economic structure of capitalism: "So . . . you begin to practice, improvise the relationship between necessity and freedom, not on the grounds of owing and credit, but on the grounds of unpayable debt."<sup>31</sup> This kind of performative action is necessarily collective. This example requires not only two people to engage in the ritual itself but also a broader subculture that values giving and receiving outside the formal economy. This collective culture is not a nameable "community," certainly not an institution. It is similar to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "the multitude," a collective noun but not an essence like "the people" in the liberal framework.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 157.

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

<sup>32</sup> "We should note that the concept of the people is very different from that of the multitude...."

**Church vis-à-vis Undercommons**

In Mennonite political theology, the church is the primary community to be analyzed, and the question is, What is the church's relationship to the sacred? How is moral authority made available to the church? For many centuries, most Mennonites were content with an orthodox description of the sacred: the word of God is given through a straightforward reading of the Bible or interpreted by bishops, elders, or pastors. Perhaps this view is more popular than ever, if one includes all the variations of Mennonite and Amish denominations in North America and around the world. In North American Mennonite scholarship, however, many political theologies tend toward the radical, or describe themselves in that way.

John Howard Yoder's work has been the most influential in this respect. In *The Original Revolution*, for example, Yoder talks about the church as a social minority: "What changed between the third and fifth centuries was not the teaching of Jesus but the loss of the awareness of minority status, transformed into an attitude of 'establishment.'"<sup>33</sup> He sees loss of social power as an opportunity for the church to regain its status as a community embodying the sacred. The church is "a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them."<sup>34</sup> The Yoderian project is arguably an attempt to reclaim the church as an undercommons of the secular. Yoder's church might exemplify what Moten and Harney are talking about: a group that refuses the options given to it by common sense Constantinian ethics. The church is the community that abstains from any alliances with power structures.<sup>35</sup> It is like an "underground movement," an

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The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 102-103.

<sup>33</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 122.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 152.

“infiltration team,”<sup>36</sup> or a diasporic existence<sup>37</sup> or messianic ethic.<sup>38</sup>

What’s interesting, however, is that the Yoderian community, while emphasizing its minority status, operates with liberal rules. In *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder outlines the basis for its authority: “The alternative to arbitrary individualism is not established authority but an authority in which the individual participates and to which he or she consents.”<sup>39</sup> He suggests a sort of social contract (liberal) model of ecclesiology to replace an orthodox model of hierarchical authority. His community discovers truth and makes decisions based on dialogue and consensus. This process is characterized by “an open context, where both parties are free to speak, where additional witnesses provide objectivity and mediation, where reconciliation is the intention and the expected outcome is a judgment that God himself can stand behind. . . .”<sup>40</sup> This is a dynamic consensus, unpredictably influenced by the addition of minority voices, but insofar as the community engages in reconciliatory engagement with others, it can claim to embody God’s authority.<sup>41</sup> The basis in consent and discourse is the reason that Yoder can claim a direct link between Western democracy and Christian congregationalism.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>37</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>41</sup> “If we were to think of Christian unity not as a consensus already present, needing only to be explicated, nor as a compromise between deeply different settled positions needing to be hassled and haggled through to a barely tolerable halfway statement, but as being led forward beyond where we were before into the discovery of a position which will not say which of us were right in the past but will renew our unity because it deepens the definition of our mission, then it could be claimed that this ethical agenda bears special promise for rediscovery of a new sense of united mission which still lies ahead of us.” Ibid., 121.

<sup>42</sup> “There is widely recognized evidence for a historic link between the Christian congregation (as the prototype) and the town meeting, between the Christian hermeneutic of dialogue in the Holy Spirit and free speech and parliament, or even between the Quaker vision of “that of God in every man” and nonviolent conflict resolution. It may work very creatively, but it can do so only if it goes all the way, to found its optimism on the logic of servanthood rather than mixing coercive beneficence with claimed theological modesty.” Ibid., 166-67.

In *Body Politics* Yoder claims to be working in a direction similar to liberation theology: “Liberation theologians today speak of ‘the epistemological privilege of the oppressed.’ There is no blunter instrument to guarantee such a hearing for hitherto inadequately spoken-for causes than to remember Paul’s simple rule that everyone must be given the floor.”<sup>43</sup> It is true that some “liberation” theologies might focus on ensuring that marginalized groups have a place at the dominant conversation, that rights are extended equally to minority populations, or that everyone has an opportunity to participate in a system. However, these are really liberal theologies in disguise.

Radical theologies, on the other hand, recognize that “giving everyone the floor” only extends the dominant paradigm further.<sup>44</sup> The act of extending the logic of discourse, even open, “messianic” discourse, is a way to domesticate the undercommons into a manageable sphere. This is not the result of bad intentions but an inherent aspect of dialogue as a mode of communication necessarily based on a particular set of rules or “grammar.” To participate in a dialogue means expressing something in a particular forum, language, and etiquette. In any actual dialogue, numerous cultural assumptions operate largely unconsciously but constrain the discourse nevertheless. It would be impossible to operate as a community or institution otherwise; some constraints are always necessary in order to rise to the level of abstraction required to form a “community.”

Yoder’s influence has shaped the basic strategy of the majority of subsequent Mennonite or Mennonite-inspired political theologies, namely the articulation of an anti-establishment but basically liberal community. Many, like Yoder, begin with an ideal consistent with the undercommons. For example, Travis Kroeker talks about “messianic ethics” as focusing “less upon the legitimating claims of defining institutions . . . than upon the embodied practices of communities that shape the public polis in the *saeculum*, the

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<sup>43</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>44</sup> It is the difference between liberal and radical feminism, for instance. The former might want women to have equal opportunities to become CEOs and make just as exorbitant salaries as male CEOs, whereas radical feminism might question the salary structure or capitalist system itself as inherently patriarchal, no matter who sits at the top.

everyday. . . .”<sup>45</sup> Or again, “ethics . . . is neither a matter of constructing frameworks or paradigms . . . , nor of problem-solving. It is in the first place a willingness to sit and walk together in the uncomfortable ‘between’ of a cultural divide. . . .”<sup>46</sup> Chris Huebner has introduced the idea of the “precariousness” of Mennonite identity, “marked by notable contradictions and ambiguities, conflicts and ruptures, that, when pushed, could be used to call into question the very idea of Mennonite identity itself.”<sup>47</sup> Kyle Gingerich Hiebert has recently re-emphasized the apocalyptic elements of Yoder’s theology, which “enjoins neither a flight from this world nor the creation of a speculative grid that regulates the meaning of being and which necessarily squelches the inevitable interruptions of surprising otherness that attempt to break into its closed system.”<sup>48</sup> Nathan Kerr proposes an ecclesiology built on a “deviant set of values,”<sup>49</sup> in which the church breaks with “every identifiable social and institutional ‘place.’”<sup>50</sup>

Of any Mennonite (or Mennonite-adjacent) political theologies, Dan Barber’s political theology would be closest to Harney and Moten’s, since both make significant use of Deleuze. In Barber’s creative reading of Yoder, Christianity “finds itself constitutively dispersed, such that to be committed to it is to be committed to a diasporic existence. . . . It is not . . . a product of history-telling; it is instead a product of fabulation – and if it exists only as fabulation, which always stems from ungrounding, then its existence depends on its ability to become ungrounded, to ‘bear with the chaos.’”<sup>51</sup> The diasporic impulse of Christianity disavows established identities and

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<sup>45</sup> P. Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>47</sup> Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>48</sup> Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 141.

<sup>49</sup> Nathan Kerr, “Communitio Missionis: Certeau, Yoder, and the Missionary Space of the Church,” in *The New Yoder*, eds. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 331.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 134.

mutually exclusive binaries in favor of “interparticular differentiation.”<sup>52</sup>

Each of these theologies, however, in some way identifies Christian communities with the messianic, the diasporic, the particular, minoritarian, or differential—in short, the undercommons. For Kroeker, the church is the “messianic community” that serves others and reconciles enemies on the model of Christ’s radical humility.<sup>53</sup> Kerr’s church is the “exilic community,” which exists without an established identity because it is sent to liberate its “others.”<sup>54</sup> Even Barber, who is most careful to separate his key term (diaspora) from any set identity, proposes Christianity as a “problematic discursive tradition that involves a commitment to diasporic existence.” Thus a Christian community in the true sense problematizes both its own identity and dominant binary systems, such as secularity and religion.<sup>55</sup>

These recent political theologies, more than Yoder, may appear to have successfully articulated an ecclesiology in which the church exists as an undercommons with respect to the dominant culture, whether in the form of nationalism, secularism, militarism, high church, etc. It is true that the undercommons has some relativity built into it. The examples given by Harney and Moten always refer to some broader system, such as the university or capitalism. Even something like the Mississippi Freedom Schools has its own “common” identity and, perhaps, currents running underneath it that function as undercommons relative to its own logic. In that case, it would simply be a matter of perspective or scope whether the church is a commons or an undercommons.

However, there is a line, perhaps a bit blurry, between activities that participate at the level of abstraction required to qualify as a “community” and the informal “study” that Harney and Moten have in mind. There is a more or less objective distinction between spaces of commons and undercommons, and to identify a community as an undercommons is a category mistake. Identifying the community as the embodiment of the sacred puts a political theology into liberal territory, even if liberal terminology is intentionally

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>53</sup> Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, 167–68.

<sup>54</sup> Kerr, “*Communio Missionis*,” 331–32.

<sup>55</sup> See also Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular,” in *The New Yoder*, eds. Dula and Huebner, 271–93.



avoided. Identifying the church with sacred space, whatever the character of that sacredness, implies such goals as extending dialogue, promoting reconciliation or unity, or broadening relations. These might be very good goals, but from a radical perspective they merely describe the community's functioning and maintenance, not its manifestation of the sacred. Even if the basic ideas of fluidity, world-loyalty, or disestablishment have been built into Mennonite political theology for some time, we have as yet articulated only the undercommons' effect on a community, not the undercommons itself.

We have moved too quickly in Mennonite political theology from a correct idea of the sacredness of the undercommons to the idea that the undercommons can or should be embodied in the Christian community. The result is a set of fictional accounts that are interesting thought experiments but lack a basis in reality. No actually existing church satisfies the descriptions given in the Mennonite political theologies listed above. Precisely the churches that are most committed to social justice or outreach (and thus the likeliest to challenge dominant social paradigms), that do the most comprehensive self-criticism, that can assert their particularity—these are the churches that wield the most intense power to curate and maintain an internal identity, perhaps even an identity based on challenging identity. If a community exists in any meaningful sense, it necessarily wields dialogical power—the power to set a context for what can and cannot be communicated or considered within its purview.<sup>56</sup>

If sovereignty is truly located in the undercommons, an actual church must be a recipient rather than a producer of sacredness. From a church's perspective as a nameable, abstract community, radical sovereignty is always an external force. It acts upon a church but is not generated or defined by a church. If sovereignty is manifested in the space outside the community's self-articulation, the ecclesiology must be one of divine absence, not of divine presence.<sup>57</sup> The space of consensus is, in a way, God-forsaken space. God has abandoned it to us. In the act of dialogue, the community establishes and

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<sup>56</sup> See Malinda Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 51.

<sup>57</sup> For a fuller treatment of the implications of divine absence for Mennonite theology, see Justin Heinzekehr, *The Absent Christ: An Anabaptist Theology of the Empty Tomb* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2019).

maintains social norms, setting boundaries between the assumed and the sacred unknown. The process of forming a consensus is arguably a process of secularization whereby previously sacred ground is made mundane.<sup>58</sup>

### **Implications for Practice**

In one sense, the shift to a radical political theology would not be a major leap, since many existing Mennonite political theologies already link the sacred to some concepts of the undercommons. But it does change how to think about dialogue, discernment, and consensus in the church. Any such activity is at most a secondary reaction to the primary sacred sphere that always remains unincorporated into dialogue. This does not imply that dialogue is negative or worthless. Just because it is not a sacred activity does not mean that communities should stop engaging in dialogue, even if were possible to do so. Indeed, the sovereign demand impinging on us from outside our self-articulation is often experienced or interpreted by the commons as a demand to be articulated in public language. However, a political theology of the undercommons should change our orientation to dialogue. The impetus and authority that drive dialogue are not synonymous with the community, nor is the outcome of any particular dialogue a sovereign decision (or “exception” in Schmitt’s sense). The function of dialogue is not to discover truth but to make existing truth mundane to the community. A community can be more or less effective as a secularizer of divine authority, and only to that extent can a community participate indirectly in the sovereignty of the undercommons.

The main practical implication is that the quality of a church’s decision-making processes does not guarantee the moral authority of the outcome. As Carol Wise and Stephanie Krehbiel point out, the very practice of discussing certain questions, namely around LGBTQ inclusion, can be an act of violence in some circumstances. As Wise says, “I’ve come to the

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<sup>58</sup> This relationship is exactly opposite to the way Barber articulates the church’s “secularizing” function. He uses lower-case “secular” to mean an affirmation of the particularity and contingency of the world, and upper-case “Secular” to mean the pretension to universality. This causes confusion, because “secularism” actually plays the function of the sacred in his political theology. When Barber says the church is “secular,” he means that the church manifests this sacred function, defined as “God’s otherness, which is produced by diaspora and apocalyptic.” Barber, “Epistemological Violence, Christianity, and the Secular,” 291.

conclusion that process is how Mennonites justify and inflict violence. As long as we have a process, we have been fair, good, and kind people.”<sup>59</sup> Krehbiel’s dissertation outlines the history of this dynamic over the past several decades, identifying a pattern of using discernment as a way of controlling and moderating LGBTQ concerns in the service of denominational unity, at great psychological expense to many queer participants.<sup>60</sup> All this discernment has not led to unity but has eroded trust in the institutional church. In the liberal paradigm, political leaders have moral authority only insofar as they embody the will of the community; but in reality, as radical theology would predict, the community only has moral authority insofar as it can adapt and respond to its undercommons.

In Mennonite institutions and congregations, a stubborn idea persists that the role of the faith community is to create better, fuller, more vulnerable, or more self-critical processes of dialogue. I connect this to the lingering liberalism of Mennonite political theology. The Yoderian model already suggests that a community’s engagement should take the form of disruptive (messianic, apocalyptic) discourse rather than majoritarian discourse, but this still ultimately implies a liberal stance, which does not align with the way that moral authority actually works.

In reality, the church is always faced with a sacred authority that takes precedence over dialogical processes and may impinge on these processes, drive them in certain directions, or derail them altogether. Despite Yoder’s emphasis on the commitment of Anabaptists to dialogue, a quick glance at the history of Mennonite denominations from the 16th through 21st centuries shows how far *disunity* and *refusal* of dialogue has actually shaped the church. Ultimately, these failures occur because some issue or difference of interpretation transcends the parameters of a dialogue. In these cases, it eventually becomes clear that to continue engaging in dialogue would be to compromise the moral authority of the community. At that point, leaders may choose to intentionally divide the community, or division happens in

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Stephanie Krehbiel, *Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA*, Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2015, 24. [https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/24844/Krehbiel\\_ku\\_0099D\\_14104\\_DATA\\_1.pdf?sequence=1](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/24844/Krehbiel_ku_0099D_14104_DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1). Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA}

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

spite of their efforts, or the community loses its ability to channel moral authority.

A recognition of the sovereignty of the undercommons would help church leaders (as well as other political leaders) take a more modest view of what can be accomplished through dialogue. Rather than thinking of the church itself as the vehicle for truth or moral authority, which places an unrealistic amount of pressure on discernment processes, it would be better to see these as maintenance activities ultimately derivative of something beyond themselves. The undercommons sometimes demands dialogue; at other times it demands cessation of dialogue. The community's success or decline depends on its response to those sovereign demands.

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Daniel Shank Cruz. *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.

*Queering Mennonite Literature* is both entirely new and long overdue in the field of Mennonite literary studies. It is the first collection of literary criticism that analyzes the small but burgeoning field of queer Mennonite creative writing. This book feels new because the major works it discusses (mostly novels) are all recent, published between 2008 and 2017. It also feels long overdue because, as the author notes, there have been queer people and queer impulses in Mennonite spaces forever, and it is past time to bring these perspectives into the wider conversation in Mennonite literary and theological circles.

To start, Cruz helpfully defines both “queer” and “Mennonite.” Queer does not simply mean that the books he discusses have LGBTQ characters, although all of them do. Queerness “is not just about sexual orientation; it is about how one views the world,” and it is activist in nature (3). He also notes the general consensus in the Mennonite literary field that Mennonite literature is writing “by an author who is a theological or ethnic Mennonite whether it includes explicitly Mennonite subject matter or not” (6). Cruz suggests that Mennonitism itself is queer, in that it is peculiar and countercultural, although the institutional Mennonite church has struggled with homophobia and exclusion (11-12).

Cruz uses close reading, personal anecdotes, and broad analysis to serve the goals of his project. One of those goals is fulfilling the need for an archive, a gathering of and greater awareness for queer Mennonite literature. He focuses on the mostly fictional work of nine authors, although he refers to several other authors and essays. The texts he writes about are queer in multiple ways. They include a book about a gay Mennonite zombie (by Corey Redekop) and a novel published as a series of cards in a box (by Miriam Suzanne)! Other authors whose work he discusses at length include Jan Guenther Braun, Christina Penner, Wes Funk, Jessica Penner, Stephen Beachy, and Casey Plett. I found his close readings fairly easy to follow, even though I had read work by only one of the authors discussed (Sofia Samatar, mentioned in the Epilogue). Cruz’s treatment of them is strengthened by his

personal voice, as he comments at several points about the texts' impact on his own life but never strays too far away from the book under consideration.

Although Cruz is writing primarily for a literary audience and not a theological one, he says that the book can be read theologically if desired—which, since I am a theology teacher/campus minister and active member of a Mennonite congregation, I do. I found myself a bit uncomfortable with some of the more sexually adventurous practices mentioned. This includes Cruz's discussion of BDSM (which involves role-playing dominance and submission in the sexual act). Cruz portrays the practice as having some connections to the Mennonite ideal of self-surrender, which to me seems potentially problematic but also intriguing to consider.

Overall, the book explores several important theological themes beyond sex and sexual orientation. These include the issue of Otherness more broadly, discernment about community and when it might be necessary to leave a community, dealing with the legacy of martyrdom, and disability. All these themes deserve ongoing engagement from multiple perspectives in the Mennonite theological world.

The biggest difficulties I had with this book were practical. While Cruz's notes are often helpful and informative, I would have preferred some of the information to be in the body of the text or as footnotes rather than endnotes. The cost of the 172-page print copy of the book is prohibitive (\$60-\$80, although only \$20 for the Kindle version), which may limit the reach of this valuable work.

The epilogue to *Queer Mennonite Literature* is perhaps the most important part of the book from a Mennonite literary perspective. It explores the call for a postcolonial shift in the field of Mennonite literature, incorporating writers of different racial and national backgrounds as well as sexual identities. This is the kind of writing and analysis that Cruz both advocates and embodies, making his work important for the future of Mennonite writing and literary criticism. He concludes that the works he discusses insist that "better, queerer futures are possible" (129). Indeed. In the broadest sense of the word "queer," may it be so.

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C. Arnold Snyder. *Faith and Toleration: A Reformation Debate Revisited*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2018.

This book is a published version of the J.J. Thiessen and John and Margaret Friesen lectures delivered at Canadian Mennonite University on October 30-31, 2017. Many Protestants treat October 31, the date Martin Luther is said to have posted the 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, as the beginning of the Reformation, and 2017 was widely celebrated as its 500th anniversary. It is only fitting, then, that lectures on faith and toleration from a Mennonite perspective be held to complement and challenge triumphalist celebrations of the event, especially those that credit it with beginning the process that led to calls for religious toleration in the West. Drawing on his work in a long and distinguished career as a historian of Anabaptism, Arnold Snyder addresses a topic whose contemporary relevance is uncontested. At the center of his message is a call for religious tolerance based in Christian humility to supplement secular arguments developed during the Enlightenment.

Snyder begins by revisiting Luther's challenge to the authority of the medieval church based on the authority of scripture. He explains how this led logically to the espousal of a principle of religious toleration, but subsequently, as the Reformation came to rely on the power of the state, Luther and other magisterial Reformers betrayed that principle. He then follows the developing case for compulsion in matters of belief in the hands of the Reformers and explains both how Anabaptists challenged the Reformers' conclusions and how they lived among their neighbors in rural communities of Switzerland, often peacefully and unmolested by authorities, despite official policies of intolerance.

The book's origins as a series of public lectures are evident throughout. It makes for an easy and enjoyable read. Snyder assumes that his listeners/readers have some knowledge of the history of the Protestant Reformation and of Anabaptism, but otherwise this volume is a very good general introduction to the topic. Furthermore, although the history he relates of the origins and development of Anabaptism and of its critique of the magisterial Reformation is not new, he updates it well, and his citations point interested readers to a wealth of new research, especially into the history of the Swiss

Brethren in the later 16th and 17th centuries. Possibly more importantly, he effectively emphasizes the urgent need for a serious discussion of a Gospel-based critique of religious intolerance to complement the secular critique derived from the Enlightenment. In fact, if anything, this point could have been made more forcefully. Research into the development of toleration more generally (e.g., Richard Tuck, "Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century," in Susan Mendes, ed. *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988, 21-36) has suggested that the scepticism about religious truth seen to lie at the basis of so much of the Enlightenment enterprise could, and sometimes did, lead as easily to calls for religious intolerance as to calls for tolerance in early modern Europe.

On two other matters Snyder might have engaged more fully with recent literature on the topic of early modern toleration. First, his account at times appears to endorse common perceptions of a linear development of religious toleration from the early modern into the modern period of Western history. Yet, as the work of István Bejczy has shown, medieval forbearance of religious difference could sometimes be more "tolerant" than the principles espoused in the Renaissance and Reformation. (See "Tolerantia: A Medieval Concept," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 365-84.) Second, our understanding of the development of religious toleration, and the role of Anabaptists in it, has changed significantly in recent years. Traditionally, practical toleration was treated as a consequence of great statements of the principle developed by people such as John Locke, and in some circles at least, Anabaptists were given credit for laying the groundwork for these principles. More recently, though, scholars have concluded that the practical toleration of everyday life was more likely the cause than the consequence of philosophical and official pronouncements. At this point, investigations of Anabaptist roles in this grassroots toleration are largely still in their infancy. Snyder hints at valuable avenues for that research, but he does not fully develop them.

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Leonard G. Friesen, ed. *Minority Report: Mennonite Identities in Imperial Russia and Soviet Ukraine Reconsidered, 1789–1945*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018.

For the past fifteen years, scholarship on the history of Mennonites in Russia has waned. While a number of interesting memoirs, document collections, and other primary sources materials have been published, interpretations of those materials have been few. In this desert, Leonard Friesen's new volume of articles by Ukrainian, Russian, and North American scholars is a welcome addition. This book, divided into four sections, delves into Mennonite history from the early 19th century to World War II. It covers a range of themes (religion, education, business, identity politics) as well as events (collectivization, the 1930s famine, German occupation during the war) within Imperial Russia and Soviet Ukraine.

In the first section, Svetlana Bobyleva provides a microhistory of the colony of Borozenko, focusing on events during the revolutionary period. This research offers new insight into Mennonite relations with their Ukrainian neighbors, especially between the villages of Sholokhovo and Steinbach, which ended in violence during the Civil War. Through archival and interview sources, Bobyleva illuminates the multitude of factors shaping this relationship; however, as she shows, these factors cannot fully explain the violence that occurred. Of special interest is her contention (unfortunately without citation), that Soviet authorities attempted to find out what happened in Steinbach by questioning residents of Sholokhovo (44). This article illustrates the value of a *longue durée* approach to understand complex events in specific spaces.

John Staples offers a contribution on the religious inspirations behind Johann Cornies's engagement with "the Tsarist reform agenda." While I am convinced that religion (though not necessarily pietism as Staples argues) performed a significant role in Cornies's actions, I appreciated Staples's idea of the importance of aesthetics in shaping Cornies's understanding of the role of Mennonites within the empire. Perhaps it would have been fruitful to place this article in dialogue with John B. Toews's assessment of A.A. Friesen, as both gifted men had strong views of how Mennonite life should be constructed as a way to secure their future as a people, and their ideas

found both supporters and detractors.

In the second section, “Imperial Mennonite Isolationism Revisited,” Irina Cherkazianova, Oksana Beznosova, and Nataliya Venger explore Mennonite-state relations in education, religion, and business. This title is somewhat misleading, as for at least twenty years scholars featured in this book (and others) have been considering the Mennonite story within the broader framework of Russian/European history. Despite this quibble, these articles, particularly Venger’s, use a host of new sources to show how policy priorities of the state influenced the opportunities and possibilities of Mennonites living within the empire. These papers demonstrate the importance of understanding the “state” as a multi-layered entity, with policies of the imperial center given a spin by local authorities. Venger’s portrait of the 1915 liquidation laws shows how local politics and sentiment influenced the interpretation of these laws. In the case of education and religion, local authorities used openings created by the state in St. Petersburg to address concerns about the Mennonite population in their territory.

The papers in the fourth section, on Soviet identities, display the most cohesion as a group. Colin Neufeldt, Alexander Beznosov, and Viktor Klets offer interpretations on how three major events of the Soviet period—the formation of collective farms, the 1930s famine, and the Second World War—shaped Mennonite identity. Neufeldt, whose ground-breaking work on the Mennonite experience during the 1930s has transformed our understanding of this period, shows how Mennonites in leadership positions “helped to undermine the authority of traditional Mennonite religious, political, and economic institutions and the leaders at their helm” (240). This identity was further reshaped during the famine, as Mennonites relied greatly on aid from family, co-religionists, and relief organizations in Germany and North America. This reliance in combination with Soviet state repression laid the groundwork for welcoming the German army in 1941. Klets has uncovered fascinating source material offering insight into Mennonite actions, especially through the eyes of their Ukrainian neighbors. His article suggests fruitful paths for future research.

In many ways, this book summarizes the research born out of two significant events: the opening of the archives in the former Soviet Union during the early 1990s, and the first major Mennonite conference organized

by Harvey Dyck in Khortitsa in 1999. The significance of this period to the development of transnational scholarly relations cannot be emphasized enough. This volume has laid a solid foundation for future research in the field.

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Joseph R. Wiebe. *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017.

In *The Place of Imagination*, Joseph R. Wiebe provides an account of Wendell Berry's moral imagination via compelling readings of Berry's fiction. Wiebe's project centers on the contention that "fictive journeys" with Berry's characters "can articulate to readers what it means to live well in wounded communities and broken places" (10). *The Place of Imagination* is divided into two sections. The second section contains close readings of three of Berry's novels *The Memory of Old Jack*, *Jayber Crow*, and *Hannah Coulter*. The first section appears to be an attempt to set a foundation for the close readings in the second section, first outlining Berry's understanding of imagination, then presenting his vision of affection and community primarily via the account of race and racism in *The Hidden Wound*, and finally discussing Berry's various narrative styles.

Wiebe is at his best when performing close readings of specific texts. His readings of the novels draw on Berry's own literary sources and inspirations, as well as Wiebe's impressive range of scholarship, to deliver subtle interpretations. Each interpretation presents a substantive and provocative theological vision and way of life. Wiebe draws us into his subject's imaginative world where knowledge is a work of faithful affection to "visible and invisible reality" (83), magnanimous despair and heartbreak expand "the soul's capacity to love" beyond guarantees (111), and the bodily ascents and descents of patient affection unite a person "with the world" (141). Wiebe's reading of *The Hidden Wound* is likewise superb, not only

providing an essential account of how race figures in Berry's work, but offering insightful commentary on the intersections of embodiment, place, work, and desire in it.

Wiebe is not always as persuasive as when he is doing these close readings. In the third chapter, he looks at four novels and short stories in order to argue that, while other narrative styles that Berry employs are ultimately inadequate for his vision, "first-person retrospective reflection is an appropriate style for expressing Berry's understanding of the ethics of affection" (77). Wiebe's readings of the separate texts in this chapter are convincing and illuminating of Berry's vision and style, but this overarching argument feels contrived and overdetermined, seemingly ignoring what Berry accomplishes with, for example, the third-person limited voice in a story like "The Boundary" or the third-person multiple voice in one like "Fidelity."

My biggest concern is the place Wiebe gives to the imagination. Especially in the introduction and the first chapter, he repeatedly claims that for Berry imagination is *the* central and exclusive faculty and starting point for the life of affection (3-4, 6, 9, 15-16, 20, 24-25, 36-38). In Wiebe's construct, one's imagination leads to one's affection and fidelity, which then informs "how one should live . . . as a result" (37). I know of nothing in Berry's writings, including those passages Wiebe cites, that would support such claims, which risk obscuring the extent to which specific practices, places, economies, and technologies engender different kinds of imagination for Berry. When, in *Hannah Coulter*, Nathan Coulter's son-in-law leaves Nathan's stepdaughter for a younger woman, Nathan does not comment on his insufficient imagination, but rather says: "It would have been better for [him] if he had been tired at night" (*Hannah Coulter* [Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004], 142).

Wiebe likewise misstates the extent to which, for Berry, local culture and tradition is essential for cultivating characters capable of imaginatively enacting an alternative economy. While his subject states that "the answers to the problem of economy are to be found in culture and in character" (*What Are People For?* [Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010], 198), Wiebe claims that the moral imagination Berry promotes must strip away "preconceived cultural and political frameworks" so that we can *then* "see the world as it

is” (20). The danger here is that imagination starts to appear floating above and imperviously dictating how one approaches any technology or form of life. Berry’s critique loses its edge if we discount how far Berry thinks the body must learn the life of affection through particular economic practices, perhaps not on the farm, as Wiebe frequently emphasizes (44, *sic passim*), but still alien to the world’s dominant economies.

This book is essential for doing work in theology with Wendell Berry. It should be of interest to anyone wanting to cultivate a more affectionate imagination amidst an alienating economy.

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J. Lawrence Burkholder. *Recollections of a Sectarian Realist: A Mennonite Life in the Twentieth Century*. Edited by Myrna Burkholder. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2016.

Based on interviews with C. Arnold Snyder and edited by the subject’s daughter Myrna Burkholder, *Recollections of a Sectarian Realist* is the autobiography of J. Lawrence Burkholder (1917-2010). The book narrates Burkholder’s life story, covering his childhood (chapter 1), college years and early ministry (chapter 2), formative years as a relief worker in India and China (chapter 3), teaching at Goshen and Princeton (chapters 4 and 5), appointment to Harvard Divinity School (chapter 6), and tenure as president of Goshen College (chapter 7). The book also details early parts of his retirement (chapter 8) and includes further “Musings on Pressing Issues of My Time” (chapter 9). In the foreword, John A. Lapp remarks upon Burkholder’s considerable influence on North American Mennonite life and describes how “he challenged the rigidity and self-satisfaction of some traditional [Mennonite] thought” (viii).

Although Burkholder was not strictly or simply a sectarian or a realist, the title of the book hints at the challenge that his life and work were (and may still be) to Mennonite thinking about a range of issues from the place of the church in wider society, to the relationship between power and violence,

and the meaning of social responsibility.

In the first chapter, Burkholder describes his early years in a small town and includes stories of childhood wonder and humorous comments on those days, as well as indications of his later interests in flying and theological reflection. His marriage to Harriet Lapp and college education are highlighted in the second chapter, and the third chapter describes his journey to China in 1944 as a relief worker through the Mennonite Central Committee. Confronted with the ambiguities of power, Burkholder's experiences flying refugees to Peking stand out as exemplary expressions of the moral entanglements that would define his doctoral dissertation (88-89). After returning home and benefitting from the financial and material aid of others, Burkholder describes his struggle to teach the Bible with integrity (100-101), and details the tensions of working paycheck-to-paycheck in a factory while pursuing a Ph.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary (102-103).

Throughout the book Myrna Burkholder has included helpful stories and details in footnotes, one of which describes Harriet's daily walk to her job at the Princeton Inn, passing Albert Einstein on his way to Princeton (103). Her father describes how, when chair of Bible and Philosophy at Goshen, his dissertation "The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church" was received with belittling comments and calls for its repudiation by influential Mennonite scholars (116-119). At that time, the dissertation was suppressed and ignored, but in 1989 the Institute of Mennonite Studies published it, and most recently Burkholder's masters thesis, dissertation, and late book manuscript on "the third way" have been edited by Lauren Friesen and published as *Mennonite Ethics: From Isolation to Engagement* (Friesen Press, 2018).

Chapter 5 concludes with Burkholder's departure from Goshen following the rejection of his ideas. Chapter 6 then describes a new phase of his life, following his appointment at Harvard, including his imprisonment following a civil rights demonstration in 1964. At Harvard, Burkholder engaged with radical student politics and the civil rights movement, and occasionally hosted Martin Luther King, Jr. Struggling to reconcile his Mennonite tendency towards separation and pacifism with the experience of women and black students, Burkholder felt a deep connection with contemporary advocates for social justice, and he soon began the Mennonite Congregation of Boston (148). Returning to become president of Goshen,

he describes the issues he faced as a college president, from dealing with alcohol and substance use in the student body to leading an endowment campaign (167). The book concludes with Burkholder's musings that include disagreements with John Howard Yoder on the ontology of evil (195), reflections on the compromises inherent in wielding institutional power (197), and thoughts on the importance of risk and the limits of nonresistance (202).

Burkholder's autobiography gives a glimpse into the life of one major—if hitherto underappreciated—Mennonite thinker in the 20th century. Arranged in a way that mirrors a classic division of a life story into stages, it bears considering what new narrative arrangements might lend structure to Mennonite lives in the 21st century, and how these arrangements may relate to and extend the social engagement and political entanglements that define Burkholder's contribution to Mennonite thought and practice.

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Kyle Gingerich Hiebert. *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.

In 1993 Stanley Hauerwas suggested that it would be fruitful for Mennonites to enter into conversation with the approach to political theology developed by John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory*. In the years since then, much Mennonite theological reflection has emerged out of critical engagements with Milbank. Kyle Gingerich Hiebert's *The Architectonics of Hope* grows out of this broad discussion and sets out to relocate it, or at least to shift some of its parameters.

The author develops a constructive genealogical account that situates the work of Milbank and his own Mennonite response to Milbank in the context of wider reflections on the relationship between violence and apocalyptic. He draws particular attention to how contemporary political theology has been significantly shaped by the work of the controversial

German political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt. While Gingerich Hiebert seeks to demonstrate that some of Schmitt's key moves continue to animate contemporary debates, he does not defend Schmitt. Rather, he claims that much contemporary political theology has been unsuccessful in disentangling itself from unacknowledged Schmittian "seductions."

Readers unfamiliar with Schmitt's work will appreciate the author's helpful summary of three strands—juridical, political, theological—that constitute Schmitt's "apocalyptically inflected aesthetics of violence." The juridical strand maintains that legal order and norms rest upon the sovereign's right to suspend them. The political strand emphasizes a basic distinction between friend and enemy that must be preserved. Both of these strands are closely related to the theological strand, according to which humans are inherently evil and inescapably prone to violence. These strands are described as dangerous "seductions" because they are said to make violence necessary in ways that foreclose possibilities of radical hope.

Gingerich Hiebert teases out how these strands—or traces of them—can be discerned even in those who claim to have "escaped the violent aporetics that characterize Schmitt's thought" (3) and position themselves as inaugurating new directions in political theology. Here the book's argumentative force comes into view. The key figure is Johan Baptist Metz, who locates his "*new* political theology" on the site of suffering because he thought Schmitt was indifferent to the kind of suffering produced by the sovereign's decisions. While more critical of the present political order, The author maintains that Metz holds open the same sort of formal space for apocalyptic violence that is so critical for Schmitt.

If Metz's work is unwittingly tangled up in the juridical and theological strands of Schmitt's apocalyptic political theology, Milbank is too tightly bound up with the political strand. Milbank demonstrates the need to create a "formal conflictual symmetry" (82) that repeats the Schmittian dialectic of friend and enemy. The lingering power of the friend/enemy distinction informs Gingerich Hiebert's search for forms of political theology able to resist the seductions of Schmitt. He turns first to Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, who engages in forms of productive disagreement that do not degenerate into zero-sum conflicts. However, Hart's place in this genealogy is more of a transitional moment, an opportunity to consider the work of John Howard Yoder.



The author stresses Yoder's account of the "open possibility of recanting" among early Anabaptists (133) and his conception of patience as a "poetic art that actively seeks out spaces of conflict by refusing to destroy the enemy" (136). By refusing the givenness of the enemy and speaking instead of an "adversary to be reconciled" (141), Yoder's apocalyptic politics of Jesus breaks the grip of the Schmittian friend/enemy dialectic so ominous in Milbank.

The one notable question regarding Yoder that the author does not really consider is how Yoder's perpetration of sexual violence is related to any of this. Because this book is largely an extended reflection on the relationship between violence, power, and seduction, this seems like a missed opportunity to shed light on the important matter of whether Yoder's sexual violence is somehow connected to his theological approach more broadly.

Gingerich Hiebert's work significantly widens the scope of contemporary Mennonite theological reflection. Whereas Hauerwas tried to get Mennonites into conversation with Milbank, Gingerich Hiebert suggests they might find a more productive dialogue partner in Hart or even Graham Ward, who aims "to recover a form of contestation that is not war" (180, n. 83). The attention paid to the aesthetic and poetic elements in Yoder's thought likewise points to fruitful avenues for further engagement. Yet this is where the author should develop and clarify some of his key overall claims. He opens the book with a reflection that stresses ways of seeing, types of vision, and "theological optics" (3). However, when he refers to the aesthetic and apocalyptic dimensions of various figures, he tends to speak in musical or poetic terms that are more auditory than visual, such as "tones" and "inflections." The term "architectonics" is no doubt meant to serve as an umbrella able to cover all these elements. But aside from the title and a few passing references in the opening pages, "architectonics" is surprisingly absent and is never really elaborated. In addition to the insightful genealogical account, a constructive theological vision is lurking in this volume's pages. The book's overall impact would be much stronger if that vision were articulated more fully and presented more confidently. Perhaps we can look forward to this in Gingerich Hiebert's subsequent work.

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Michael Bourgeois, Robert C. Fennell, and Don Schweitzer, eds. *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019.

The United Church of Canada (UCC) and various Anabaptist bodies have for some time collaborated in mission and justice work, yet there never has been an official theological engagement between the two traditions. Both are relatively new to the theological scene; the UCC is a young denomination, and Anabaptist theologies only emerged in large part following Harold Bender's 1944 *The Anabaptist Vision*. The result is a general unfamiliarity with convergences and divergences between these two rich, lively traditions. In *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, a range of scholars provides an historical account of UCC theology from its 1925 inauguration to the present. This volume offers a way (absent an official dialogue) for ecumenically-minded Anabaptists to explore the theological similarities, differences, and ambiguities between the traditions.

While the volume's historical approach may at times prove dry to an Anabaptist ("What has Toronto to do with Winnipeg?"), the treatment of doctrine and other key statements provides context for understanding contemporary UCC theology. Twelve core submissions draw chiefly from the UCC's four subordinate standards (its ultimate standard is Holy Scripture)—*The Twenty Articles of Doctrine* (1925), *A Statement of Faith* (1940), *A New Creed* (1968, revised 1980, 1995), and *A Song of Faith* (2006)—plus other texts to chronicle the UCC's understanding of key doctrinal matters.

John Young's introductory chapter places "the UCC's theological trajectory in the broader context of North American Protestant thought" (2), constellating it with liberal theology, neo-orthodoxy's influence on the denomination in the mid-20th century, and its turn in recent decades to liberative and contextual theologies. More narrowed contributions, such as Sandra Beardsall's survey of sin and redemption, concretely demonstrate how cultural trends have impacted UCC theology. From its opposition to "alcohol consumption, Sunday sports and theatre, and gambling" to its self-understanding as a sinning church in recent decades (119), Beardsall documents how being a church "vigorously engaged with its culture" has resulted in a consistently clear denunciation of Canada's sins, private

or corporate, and a contextually malleable doctrine of sin. The impact of Canadian culture on UCC theology permeates the whole book, a phenomenon that invites dialogue with the heirs of the radical Reformers.

Other contributors, such as HyeRan Kim-Cragg, use doctrinal tools to interpret historic moments in the church. Writing on theological anthropology and sanctification as “grow[ing] into one’s full potential” (206), Kim-Cragg narrates historical moments when the denomination “grew into” that potential, such as the first ordination of a woman in 1936 and the 1988 recognition of the full membership of gay and lesbian Christians (as they were then called) and their eligibility for ministry.

In large measure the essays skilfully paint a clear picture of the shape and situatedness of UCC theology. However, the volume is weakened when contributors veer into their own constructive projects and step beyond the stated aim to recount “how UCC perspectives on certain doctrines have developed over the years” (1). Kim-Cragg, for instance, briefly covers her interpretation of the UCC theology of sanctification before devoting most of her chapter to recounting historic moments when the denomination, in her view, “lived towards sanctification” (206). While an intriguing approach, this sheds little light on how the UCC understands sanctification as expressed in its doctrine. Harold Wells, giving an account of the denomination’s understanding of creation, decries its early “classical theism.” He defines it as “a doctrine of an all-controlling, unchangeable, and invulnerable deity” and dismisses it as incongruent with human experience and rightly replaced with new models of divinity (79). His claim that early UCC theology is representative of his own take on classical theism is both mistaken and reductionist; early UCC documents produced nuanced, thoughtful reflection on classical themes like aseity and sovereignty while upholding them. Detours into personal constructive projects do not adequately represent the denomination’s theological identity nor clarify its doctrinal development.

Nevertheless, as Christian discipleship faces unique challenges in the face of secularism, and as denominations like the UCC and Anabaptist churches learn how truly good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in greater unity (Psalm 133:1), this volume is an invaluable resource in coming to know our siblings in Christ more deeply and fully. At a time

when Christian bodies find themselves working together by necessity, *The Theology of The United Church of Canada* reveals what the UCC brings to the table.

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George Hunsinger, ed. *Karl Barth, the Jews, and Judaism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018.

All but three of the essays in this volume were originally delivered at “Karl Barth, the Jews, and Judaism,” a conference held at Princeton Theological Seminary in June 2014. This publication is one of two arising from the conference that George Hunsinger edited and contains essays by senior scholars. The other, *Karl Barth: Post-Holocaust Theologian?* (T&T Clark, 2018), includes essays by younger scholars.

David Novak’s provocatively titled essay, “How Jewish Was Karl Barth?,” takes Barth’s interpretation of Micah 6:8 (“It has been told to you, O mortal, what is good...”) as its starting point. Novak aims to show “*how* Barth thought *like* a Jewish thinker thinks” (1), finding parallels in Barth’s exegesis of Micah 6:8 with rabbinic interpretations of the same passage. The second essay, “Karl Barth and the Jews: The History of a Relationship,” is by Eberhard Busch, Barth’s assistant for many years. Busch notes that a primary consequence of Barth’s theological affirmation of the unity of “gospel and law” was his affirmation of the “inseparable bond” between Jews and Christians (27). Busch shows how this was an especially significant affirmation to give in the 1930s and how Barth’s opposition to many forms of German Protestant anti-Judaism was a direct result of this theological starting-point.

The third essay is a transcript of a dialogue between Novak and Busch (moderated by Hunsinger). The dialogue is an example of how a Jewish theologian/philosopher and a Christian theologian, both heavily influenced by Barth, respond to questions on themes Barth prioritized, including divine election, Law and Gospel as revelation, the question of Jewish and Christian unity, and natural theology.

Hunsinger's essay, "After Barth: A Christian Appreciation of Jews and Judaism," argues for a form of Christian philo-Semitism or Judaeophilia that is grounded in Christ. Hunsinger claims that such an argument can in part be built from Barth's theology. Barth affirmed God's irrevocable covenant with Israel, spoke out against antisemitism as a form of disobedience, and discouraged Christian missions to the Jews. In spite of that, he confessed in a 1967 letter to a former student that he was "decidedly not a philosemite," and he did reproduce negative caricatures of Jews in his theology. Hunsinger attempts to appropriate what gains Barth made while expunging the negative elements.

Peter Ochs's "To Love Tanakh Is Love Enough for the Jews," is a reflection on the impact of *Dabru Emet*—a Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity—published in 2000 in the *New York Times*. The statement was co-authored by Novak and Ochs among others. Affirming claims like "Jews and Christians worship the same God," the statement was a response to the positive efforts of postliberal theologians, who were highly indebted to Barth, to address historic anti-Judaism and show "Christian concern for the Jews" (77). Ochs outlines key characteristics of postliberal theology and ends by asking how one might read *Dabru Emet* in relation to Barth's theology.

The sixth essay, by Victoria J. Barnett, is a very helpful historical account of Barth's interfaith encounters from 1945 to 1950. She talks about three different occasions when Barth met with Jews over that period, once in the Swiss village of Seelisberg in 1947 and twice in 1950 with young Swiss Jews to discuss his theology of Israel. Barnett points out the significant challenges that Jews and Christians faced in conducting interreligious dialogue in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Following Barnett's piece are three essays by scholars of an earlier generation who were influenced by Barth: Thomas Torrance, C.E.B. Cranfield, and Hans Küng. While thematically appropriate to the question of Christian theologies of Israel and Judaism influenced by Barth, these essays could have used additional framing by the editor.

Ellen Charry's "Toward Ending Emnity" closes this volume with a spirited and inspiring essay. Arguing that Jewish and Christian traditions need to rethink their "theological assessment of the other for the sake of its own theological well-being" (147), she lays bare the theological tendencies

that prevent such re-thinking for both communities and recommends an alternative theological trajectory of spiritual friendship. For this essay alone, this volume is of great value not only to Barth scholars but also to communities—such as Mennonites—who continue to reckon with our own history of involvement in the history of anti-Judaism and seek a theological way forward.

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# **Call for Proposals**

## **MENNONITES, SERVICE, AND THE HUMANITARIAN IMPULSE: MCC AT 100**

**October 23-24, 2020  
Winnipeg, Manitoba**

In 1920 Mennonites from different ethnic and church backgrounds formed Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to respond collaboratively to the famine ravaging Mennonite communities in the Soviet Union (Ukraine). Since then MCC has grown to embrace disaster relief, development, and peacebuilding in more than 60 countries. One of the most influential Mennonite organizations of the 20th and 21st centuries, MCC has facilitated cooperation among various Mennonite groups, constructing a broad inter-Mennonite, Anabaptist identity, and bringing Mennonites into global ecumenical and interfaith partnerships.

This centennial conference invites proposals for papers examining MCC's past, present, and future, and reflecting on Mennonite response to the biblical call to love one's neighbor through practical acts of service. Proposals are welcome from various academic perspectives, including but not limited to anthropology, conflict transformation and peacebuilding, cultural studies, development studies, economics, history, political science, sociology, and theology.

The conference will be hosted by the Chair of Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg, in collaboration with Canadian Mennonite University.

### **DEADLINE FOR PROPOSALS: DECEMBER 1, 2019**

Send proposals or questions to Royden Loewen, Chair in Mennonite Studies,  
University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E9, Canada.  
E-mail: [r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca).

Limited research grants are available to help defray costs related to research in MCC's archives in Akron, Pennsylvania or at other MCC sites. Queries, with a brief two-paragraph description of the proposed research, should be sent to Alain Epp Weaver: [aew@mcc.org](mailto:aew@mcc.org). Requests for research grants will be assessed on an ongoing, rolling basis.

# Call for Papers

## **MENNONITE/S WRITING IX THIRTY YEARS OF MENNONITE/S WRITING: RESPONDING TO THE PAST, CREATING THE FUTURE**

**Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana  
October 22-25, 2020**

This international conference celebrates the 30th anniversary of the first Mennonite/s Writing conference in 1990 and looks to the future of Mennonite literature. Seven conferences since 1990 have helped establish Mennonite literature as a presence in creative writing and literary criticism. The 2020 event will reflect on this history, celebrate new and ongoing work, and encourage the future of the Mennonite/s Writing project. Conference organizers welcome new and diverse voices as we honor past accomplishments.

- What trends in the field might elicit further study?
- What might the publishing future of the field look like?
- How should we explore the relationship between Mennonite literature and other art forms?
- What is the relationship between Mennonite literature and the Mennonite faith community or other areas of Mennonite studies?
- What is the relationship between Mennonite literature and other fields of literary studies?
- What are the results of teaching Mennonite Literature and mentoring writers?

We invite scholarly and creative proposals related to Mennonite literature from any area of the world and from any time period. Proposals may consider the work of established or new writers.

The conference will also celebrate 40+ years of publishing in the Goshen College English Department and will include pre-conference workshops for students, creative writers, and teachers.

### **PROPOSAL SUBMISSION DEADLINE: JANUARY 1, 2020**

Submit a 250-word abstract and short CV to  
Ann Hostetler: [anneh@goshen.edu](mailto:anneh@goshen.edu). The selection committee  
will make decisions on proposals by April 1, 2020.



# **Conference Notice**

## **INDIGENOUS-MENNONITE ENCOUNTERS**

**May 14-16, 2021**

A DIVERGENT VOICES OF CANADIAN MENNONITES CONFERENCE

**Conrad Grebel University College  
Waterloo, Ontario**

In October 2000 the History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations Conference was held at the University of Winnipeg. Much has happened in Indigenous-Canadian relations since then, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the “Idle No More” movement, awareness of the impact of the “Sixties Scoop,” and initiatives to Indigenize post-secondary institutions. At the same time Mennonite organizations, churches, and individuals are establishing new relationships with Indigenous communities, reconsidering their settler narratives, and assessing their roles in past injustices.

The Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies is pleased to host a Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites conference in 2021 on the theme of Indigenous-Mennonite encounters. The conference location is significant, as Mennonites were the first European settlers on this land, the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples, comprising Block 2 of the Haldimand Tract granted in 1784 to the Six Nations. Waterloo is also near both the first area of settlement for Mennonites in Canada and the largest First Nations reserve in Canada, Six Nations of the Grand River.

The conference will involve Indigenous and Mennonite voices and will focus on building present relationships through discovering the past.

### **ADDITIONAL DETAILS AND A CALL FOR PROPOSALS WILL FOLLOW.**

Marlene Epp and Laureen Harder-Gissing,  
Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies,  
Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1

# Call for Proposals

## HOPE, DESPAIR, LAMENT

**Graduate Student Conference IX**

**June 18-20, 2020**

**Eastern Mennonite University**

**Harrisonburg, VA**

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? -- Habakkuk 1:2

What is the role of hope, despair, and lament for a people of peace in a world marked by polarization, violence, and ecological catastrophe? How might the church make sense of an uncertain future, and what possible futures might emerge from and for the church? Are there resources within Anabaptist/Mennonite faith traditions that speak to our current moment?

Hosted by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, this conference invites proposals for scholarly papers and other presentations aimed at a scholarly audience that explore hope, despair, and/or lament. The aim is to offer a forum for graduate students working on Anabaptist/Mennonite related topics and/or belonging to Anabaptist/Mennonite traditions to present their research in an interdisciplinary and ecumenical context and to engage with colleagues and peers.

We welcome proposals from disciplines including but not limited to theology, biblical studies, patristics, pastoral/practical studies, ethics, philosophy, religious studies, peacebuilding and conflict transformation studies, anthropology, sociology, gender studies, diaspora and transnational studies, history, literature, and musicology.

Travel bursaries may be available to qualifying presenters.

Accommodation details TBA.

For more information: <http://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/tmtcgradconference>

**DEADLINE FOR PROPOSALS: FEBRUARY 1, 2020**

Send your proposal (300 words max., incl. title) to [mennonite.centre@utoronto.ca](mailto:mennonite.centre@utoronto.ca).  
Include your name and affiliation only in your e-mail cover, not in the proposal.

*The Conrad Grebel Review* (CGR) is a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal of Christian inquiry devoted to advancing thoughtful, sustained discussions of theology, peace, society, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives. It is published three times a year in print and electronically.

### **Articles**

Articles are original works of scholarship engaged with relevant disciplinary literature, written in a style appealing to the educated non-specialist, and properly referenced. Length limit: 7500 words, excluding notes, plus a 100-word abstract. Manuscripts are typically sent in blind copy to two peer-reviewers for assessment.

### **Reflections**

Reflections are thoughtful and/or provocative pieces drawing on personal expertise and experience, and may take the form of homilies, speeches, or essays. While held to the same critical standard as articles, they are generally free of scholarly apparatus. Length limit: 3000 words.

### **Responses**

Responses are replies to articles either recently published in CGR or appearing in the same issue by arrangement. Length is negotiable.

### **Book Reviews and Book Review Essays**

Book reviews draw attention to current scholarly and other works that fall within CGR's mandate. Length limit: 900 words. Book review essays typically cover several publications on a common theme. For more information, contact CGR Book Review Editor Kyle Gingerich Hiebert ([kyle.gingerichhiebert@utoronto.ca](mailto:kyle.gingerichhiebert@utoronto.ca)).

## **SUBMISSION PROCEDURE**

We welcome submissions of articles, reflections, and responses. Send your submission electronically as a WORD attachment to: **Stephen Jones, Managing Editor, [cgredit@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:cgredit@uwaterloo.ca)**. Include your full name, brief biographical information, and institutional affiliation in the covering e-mail. CGR will acknowledge receipt immediately, and will keep you informed throughout the assessment process. Accepted papers are subject to Chicago style and copy editing, and are submitted to authors for approval before publication.

For CGR's Style Guide, Citation Format Guide, and other useful information, please consult the submissions page on our website: [grebel.ca/cgreview](http://grebel.ca/cgreview).

CGR is indexed in Religious & Theological Abstracts, EBSCOhost databases, in the Atla (American Theological Library Association) Religion Database, and in the full-text AtlaSerials® collection. CGR is also available online at [grebel.ca/cgreview](http://grebel.ca/cgreview).

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