

What is your definition of Anabaptist–Mennonite?

Do you work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar?

By Lydia Neufeld Harder

How do scholars respond when asked for “definitions and confessions” (as one respondent named my efforts)? I had asked the questions, noted above, in a survey accompanying the last issue of the *Network*. I was pleased to receive 45 responses in total (35 definitions and 44 confessions) assuring me that scholars are concerned with both. The largest group of respondents came from Mennonite related educational institutions (16). Professors at other schools, people in related professions (such as pastors) and retired persons were represented by an equal number of responses (nine). Six students answered the questions. The fact that only four women, and only one from outside of North America responded suggests the limitations of this exercise.

All except seven scholars said they work self-consciously as Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars, though a few would qualify their “yes” in some way. However, the responses also suggest that scholars struggle with “boundary setting and identity issues” even though they do not agree whether the “definitional game” is a “contest” which excludes others or a helpful way to confess one’s own rootedness in a particular tradition and context.

Generally, the definitions given could be

placed into the three categories below. A significant number of respondents combined two or three of these in some way. I will report on each indicating both the majority view and the questions raised under each category.

Historical identity marker

Most respondents acknowledged that Anabaptist-Mennonite is an “identity marker” that places one “historically and theologically with those

continued on page 2. . .

New organizational structure for scholars Network

Background Information

The *Network*, as an association of Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars, has been active since May, 1998. This is the 4th newsletters (*Network*) that has been published. Over 160 persons have joined the Network as members by paying the membership fee. There are over 350 who have filled out a form over the last number of years and therefore are included in our data-base. The goal of this association is to facilitate networking among scholars who understand themselves as relating to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. At the same time the *Network* can serve as a resource to the larger church by maintaining a data-base of scholars.

continued on page 4. . .

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**“Definition of Anabaptist-Mennonite”
 . . . continued from page 1**

“To be Anabaptist-Mennonite is to find a place in a diverse five-century story, a living tradition, even if that place is sometimes a critical ‘over-against’ wrestling.”

who trace their spiritual roots to that 16th century tradition.” Some scholars placed the emphasis on personal identity, suggesting that the term includes anyone “who traces their spiritual, cultural or genealogical roots to the Anabaptist movement or any of its many manifestations since then”; others stressed an intentional “communal identity and commitment” which works itself out by active participation in a “worshipping community” that claims the Anabaptist theological heritage as its own. Several acknowledged that while they felt on the fringes of what constitutes Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship, a certain scholarly identity was still inevitable (and observable by others), showing up in such things as an interest in the “underside of modern international relations that is constituted by pacifists, revolutionaries and cultural ‘others’ not state-makers” or an interest in “Jesus” or a reading of the gospel “that does not track closely with other traditions at critical points.”

Terms such as “informed by,” and “inspired by” were used to speak of the influence that the “spirit”, “vision”, “imagination”, “behavior” and “critical thinking” of the Anabaptists had on the present. However, the tension created by the very linking of the two names was noted by a number of scholars. One respondent summarized it this way: “To be Anabaptist-Mennonite is to find a place in a diverse five-century story, a living tradition, even if that place is sometimes a critical ‘over-against’ wrestling.” Sounds like a recipe for pluralism. . . a lived experience and inheritance—at once attractive, off-putting, defining, in a culture that lacks such stories. Put another way, Anabaptist is a 16th century ‘moment,’ and insertion into a context in which medieval certainties had crumbled; Mennonite is a cluster of stories, a lived inheritance—some if it good, some problematic.”

One person used an image to suggest a way in which the terms are different, yet clearly related. For him, “Anabaptist” refers to the “air-freight-route of flying to the origins and returning with goods to serve the contemporary church.” “Mennonite” reflects “overland ways in which the Anabaptist movement has been borne and remembered by living Mennonite communities.

Hence, ‘Anabaptist-Mennonite’ is a general designation for the Mennonite historic tradition that has been informed by research of early Anabaptist sources.”

Objections to the linking of Anabaptist and Mennonite came from several different directions. A number of people acknowledged that Anabaptist is not nearly as significant as other identities for many Mennonites, another felt that the term is “obscure.” This latter writer is convinced that we would do better “to stay with our traditional identification [as Mennonite], rather than dressing ourselves up with this supposedly more glamorous name—a name which is, however, scarcely understood outside a few elite ‘Anabaptist’ circles. ‘Mennonite’—though carrying ambiguities that may be embarrassing in some respects—is a word that has acquired a certain dignity through centuries of continuous use as well as through the current activities of such agencies as the Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service; and it is widely known and reasonably well understood.” Another agreed, saying that it is “pretentious” for modern Mennonites to use the term, since we are not rebaptizers. As one person suggested, the name can be used to claim “something that is vaguely positive, but with no broadly shared common definition. Sometimes Anabaptist is used to cover over the embarrassment of the visible reality of the identities currently known as Mennonite.”

Does “the Anabaptist-Mennonite agenda exclude other Anabaptists (Anabaptist-Pietists, Anabaptist Believers Church, Anabaptist Free Church, etc.) from conversations and from participation in events such as conferences, gatherings at the AAR, etc?” One person felt strongly that the “denominational” label “Mennonite” excluded other Anabaptists who might “disrupt” the conversation if allowed in.

One person suggested that it is a “transitional” term, “not adequate for what we are now becoming or are called to be,” though “useful at a time of great uncertainty and groping. It will fade away in favor of other names as a new identity emerges (if it does).” One person gave a concrete suggestion as to where we are moving in this transition. His bias was toward “ecumenicity.”

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Substantive Definitions

Generally persons who named particular convictions did not focus on beliefs stated in merely in a conceptual way, but rather emphasized integrity, commitment and practice consistent with belief. One respondent called the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith a “form of life and thought” that indicates certain priorities. Only one person suggested that the tenets emphasized moved “toward” a normative definition. And only one person, a Lutheran who appreciates the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith, related the definition to a confession of faith, namely the “Schleitheim articles and/or the Dortrecht confession.” Two respondents were concerned to emphasize the trinitarian nature of faith. In fact, Jesus was mentioned most often by the respondents, the Holy Spirit as empowerment was mentioned the next most often while God as active in the world was mentioned least.

The influence of H.S. Bender’s “The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision” seemed to me to continue to be evident in these substantive claims. I have listed them in order from the most mentioned to the least.

- Peace-making and rejection of violence and coercion
- Discipleship and following Jesus. Jesus as source of enabling grace or power was emphasized by a number of writers.
- Formation of voluntary alternate communities of faith. This included an emphasis on believers’ baptism
- Importance of the Bible. One suggested this meant a “robust (but not literal) biblicism,” another called this an “indwelling” in the scriptures so that the scriptures can be “world-creating”; only one person used the term “authoritative.”
- Mutual accountability, priesthood of all believers, and the non-hierarchical nature of the faith community
- Concern for justice, hope and liberation for the poor and oppressed. The word “service” was only mentioned once.
- Mission, evangelism, witness. This was mentioned approximately as often as concern for justice.
- Personal spirituality and new birth
- Resistance to elements in the larger society or church that compromise Christian faith
- Simple living and abundant living

Concern with theological discernment process

The process of doing theology was identified as important for someone naming themselves as Anabaptist-Mennonite. The term for this process mentioned most often was “community discernment” (the traditional term) or “dialogue and conversation” (the more contemporary term). For example, one person put it this way: “The development of an imaginative vision is process oriented—a commitment to conversation and dialogue at the congregational, denominational, and ecumenical levels. The conversation must be inclusive: voices of women, the gay community, racial minorities, and reflect a global church so as to move beyond a European/North American centre.” There was concern with “dynamic” interpretation, with new applications to the changing conditions of society and culture, with biblical and theological interpretation always in process.

At the same time, convictions are to be “embodied.” As one person put it, this “has meant that theology cannot help but be diverse and contestable as it takes varied shape within different bodies and contexts.” This also means that a “lived theology is critical and must in fact critique any theology which remains purely theoretical and disembodied from the life of the community and its individual members.” One person connected his work to non-conformity. He stated it this way: “A value that I embrace in my scholarship and teaching is the value of considered and rationalizable nonconformity whether this is to disciplinary terms, institutional proprieties, or religious/theological positions.” For a number of people the attitude toward tradition was not simply “to duplicate the responses to questions given in the past, but to do what the early Christians and the Anabaptists did: to construct our own vision in the light of our own challenges in our cultural context.”

Conclusion

I want to suggest that scholars who work at substantive “definitions” will not hinder significant dialogue with others by creating false boundaries if they are also ready to make the “confessions” that come with an acknowledgment of their own roots, identity and present context. The ambiguity surrounding the term Anabaptist-Mennonite may in fact help keep our

Send us
your
responses to
this article.
We will
continue the
discussion
in the next
issue of
Network.

“Organizational structure” ... continued from page 1

The following strategies have been the main work of the Network:

- keeping up a database of scholars
- publishing the newsletter 2 times a year (this includes brief articles, book publication notices, job and research possibilities, notices of upcoming conferences etc.)
- making sure that there is a sponsor for the program of the annual forum and reception at the AAR/SBL. (The Institute of Mennonite Studies has continued to make the practical arrangements).

This work has been carried on through the support of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC). Lydia Neufeld Harder, the director, has made the arrangements for the meetings and has edited the newsletter with the help of several graduate students. Advice has been informally solicited from several scholars who have shown interest in this project. However, since she has resigned the position as director, this seems an opportune time to suggest a more permanent structure.

During this coming year, TMTC will be experiencing some changes in administration and ownership. The board has made a decision to invite Conrad Grebel College and its graduate program to take over the administrative ownership of TMTC. The bi-national board will continue as an advisory board for the program in Toronto which is mainly focused on doctoral level students. Conrad Grebel College has indicated its willingness to continue to play a supportive role to the Network through TMTC.

Proposed Organizational Structure

1. TMTC would continue to provide institutional support for the Network. This would include the use of office equipment, the naming of someone to be responsible for the data-base and newsletters, and the maintenance of the financial records. Members would continue to contribute membership fees which TMTC would process through their treasury. An annual financial report would be given to the members.

2. A graduate student would be named to edit the newsletters and keep up the data-base. A specified amount of money would be given for this work. (Jeremy Bergen, an MA student at the Toronto School of Theology and administrative assistant for TMTC has been named to do this work.).

3. A small reference group of scholars would provide direction, feed-back and resources for the student. (At this point Lydia Neufeld Harder (Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre) and Ted Grimsrud (Eastern Mennonite University) have consented to be part of this committee.) Please volunteer if you are interested!

4. A short meeting will be held annually at the AAR/SBL meetings for members of the reference group and any other scholars interested in giving feed-back.

Comments and suggestions are welcomed.

Consultation addresses history of suffering

A consultation held at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, November 12-13, 1999 addressed the topic: "Living with a History of Suffering: Addressing the Repercussions of the Soviet Mennonite Experience." November 12 included a keynote address by Waldemar Janzen on a biblical perspective of suffering. November 13 consisted of papers presented from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and discussion. Disciplines included theology, history, psychology, pastoral ministry, and church music.

Some of these papers will be published in a forthcoming issue of the Conrad Grebel Review. If you would like a copy of the summary of the papers presented and discussion (in electronic format), send a message to Jeremy Bergen at: tmtc@chass.utoronto.ca

Please note our new email address:

tmtc@chass.utoronto.ca

upcoming events

Send us your events, book notes and job openings. The next newsletter will be published in May.

January 24-28, 2000

Pastors' Week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. The theme is "Bringing them in without selling out: Evangelism and Peace."

For more information, call 219-295-3726.

January 31-February 1, 2000

Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Winter Lectures. The Right Reverend Steven Charleston will speak on the topic: "The 'Old Testament' of Native North America: Good News for the Christian Church." Bishop Charleston is a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and currently is Chaplain of Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. He will address issues such as how Native Christians express their faith as Aboriginal people and what Native Christians bring to the wider Christian church.

For more information, contact Glenn Bergen at 204-888-6781; email: gbergen@mennonitechurch.ca

February 5, 2000

"Without Spot or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church," a conference at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. Is the "without spot or wrinkle" a legacy helpful today in characterizing the community of the faithful? What are the "marks" of the true church as we enter the 21st century

For further information, contact Karl Koop at 219-296-6242; email: kkoop@ambs.edu

March 16-17, 2000

Public lectures by Miroslav Volf, theology professor at Yale University Divinity School. March 16 in Toronto, sponsored by TMTc. On March 17 in Waterloo, sponsored by Conrad Grebel College.

For further information, contact Jim Reimer, Conrad Grebel College at 519-885-0220, ext. 234; email: ajreimer@uwaterloo.ca; or Jeremy Bergen, TMTc at 416-978-6078, email: tmtc@chass.utoronto.ca

March 16-18, 2000

Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA, will hold a conference on the theme, "Confronting the Powers: Overcoming Evil With Good." Walter Wink, professor of New Testament studies at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York will give the keynote address and serve as primary resource person for the conference. Other plenary speakers will include Willard Swartley of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary; and Nancey Murphy and Glen Stassen, both of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif.

For more information, contact Shirley Kouns at 540-432-4260; email: kounss@emu.edu.

June 15-18, 2000

A symposium will be held on the campus of Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, with the title: "An Anabaptist Vision for the New Millennium: a Search for Identity." Designed to facilitate conversation and dialogue among persons with a heart for the Mennonite church, the symposium will feature a series of brief (fifteen-minute) "manifestos" presented by a variety of individuals from across the academic and churchly landscape.

Questions (or submissions) should be directed to Dale Schrag, director of church relations at Bethel College at 316-284-5356; email: drs@bethelks.edu

January 29 - February 2, 2001

Pastors' Week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. The speaker is Walter Wink.

employment opportunities

Mennonite College Federation is seeking full-time faculty for September 2000 in the following six areas:

- English
- Conflict Transformation Studies (2 openings)
- Computer Science
- International Development Studies (2 openings)
- Psychology or Sociology
- Athletics Director

Mennonite College Federation is a co-operative association of three colleges in Winnipeg, committed to the Biblical faith and rooted in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

All openings are pending approval by the college boards. Please see our website for detailed information about these positions: www.mcfed.mb.ca

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book notes

Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible. Edited by **Ted Grimsrud** and **Loren L. Johns**. Pandora Press U.S.; copublisher Herald Press. Available now. Price: \$22.95 in US, \$34.95 in Canada. These essays offer new light on the politics of God and the peaceable character of biblical visions of justice.

Apocalypticism & Millennialism: Shaping A Believers Church Eschatology for the 21st Century. Edited by **Loren L. Johns**. Studies in the Believers Church Tradition. Pandora Press Canada; copublisher Herald Press. Available early 2000.

Anabaptists and Postmodernity. Edited by **Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast**. C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 1. Pandora Press U.S.; copublisher Herald Press. Available spring 2000.

Dancing with the Kobzar: Bluffton College and Mennonite Higher Education, 1899-1999. By **Perry Bush**. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, vol. 38. Pandora Press U.S.; copublisher Herald Press. Available May 2000.

Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium. By **J. Denny Weaver**. C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 2. Pandora Press U.S.; copublisher Herald Press. Available Fall 2000.

Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World. Edited by **Linford Stutzman** and **David W. Shenk**. Herald Press. Price: \$15.99 in US; \$23.79 in Canada. "A Christian who is not missionary is a contradiction in terms. But how to do mission while avoiding the violence that mission has often entailed? These essays, by people committed to Jesus' nonviolent mission, explore how Christians must recover confident witness to Christ, who alone is the peace for which the world hungers." - Stanley Hauerwas, Duke University Divinity School

Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists In Latin America, 1933-1945. By **John D. Thiesen**. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, vol. 37. Pandora Press, copublisher Herald Press. Price: \$25 in US; \$28 in Canada.

member info

Many of you have paid your 1999 Network membership fees. If you did not pay in 1999, consider this your invitation to do so! You are also welcome to pay your 2000 fees (note on the cheque which year you are paying for). Fees are \$20 US, \$25 Canadian, \$10 student.

We have not included a personal data sheet in this edition of *Network*. The May newsletter is when we push to update the database and receive membership fees. You will receive a printout of the data you have submitted so that corrections may be returned to us. That newsletter will also report how the money is being used.

Please share this newsletter with interested colleagues. If you are reading this but not already a member, contact us directly so that we may add your information to the database.

Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network

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