

ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE
SCHOLARS

Network

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Anabaptist-Mennonite identity and scholarship In this issue...

by *Jeremy Bergen, editor*

With this issue of *Network*, we continue the discussion about Anabaptist-Mennonite identity and scholarship. This conversation is integral to the *Network*'s mandate to facilitate theological discussion among scholars and between scholars and the church. A year ago, Lydia Neufeld Harder, then director of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, invited you to reflect on your definition of "Anabaptist-Mennonite" and whether or not you work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar.

In the last issue of the *Network* newsletter, Lydia analyzed the 45 responses and suggested that they could be placed into three general categories: "Anabaptist-Mennonite" as historical identity marker, as a substantive label defined by certain beliefs/practices, and as indicative of a certain process of doing theology and scholarship. In this issue, four scholars respond to Lydia's article, and to the original questions.

Included with this issue for each *Network* member is a personalized data sheet. **Please take the time to review yours carefully and send any updates and corrections** to us by whatever format is most convenient. We need current data! (See page 5 for an explanation of the changes in the data sheet format and content.) **You are encouraged you to join this association by paying annual membership fees.** (\$25 Cdn, \$20 US, \$10 student.) As your year-end is June 30, your prompt response is greatly appreciated. These modest fees fund the publication of two newsletters, the maintenance of the database and office costs. Since significant

information is missing on nearly a third of *Network* members, it is difficult to use this data to produce charts and graphs until it is updated. I intend to include this sort of information with the next issue.

One of the aims for the *Network* is that it become a place for dialogue and exchange among Mennonite scholars of many disciplines. Pass it on to colleagues who are not part of the *Network* and invite them join. Please respond to the articles on Anabaptist-Mennonite identity or write a discussion piece on another topic. The *Network* is a unique group of over 300 scholars working in theological disciplines, humanities, social sciences and church/conference work.

An Invitation

2000 Mennonite Scholars & Friends forum, Nashville AAR/SBL meeting.

The theme will be 'Is God Nonviolent?' A panel of four speakers representing a fairly unified perspective (tentatively set to be Duane Friesen, Ray Gingerich, Ted Grimsrud, and Paul Keim) will address the question in relation to biblical studies, history of Christianity, theology, and ethics. At least half of the session will be devoted to open discussion. The host/planning institution for this year's meeting will be Eastern Mennonite University. Tentative time is Friday, November 17, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

Sponsored by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and the
Institute for Mennonite Studies

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'Anabaptist-Mennonite' designation is tied to people

What is my definition of Anabaptist-Mennonite?

If someone in my presence, at the secular, state university where I teach, called himself or herself 'Anabaptist-Mennonite,' how would I understand what the person is saying? The initial thought would be that the person is a current and active member of a Mennonite congregation. There are a number of Mennonite congregations within 50 miles of the university, whose members include a good number of students and professors. My second thought would be that the person is indicating a cluster of values preferences, such as simplicity, nonviolence, service, communalism, concern for social justice. Mennonite values are known here (the university contains the Mennonite College of Nursing, for example), and the word is used colloquially. (I would be intrigued to inquire where the person learned the 'Anabaptist' part, however, which would indicate more than colloquial acquaintance with the tradition.) The next thought would be the ethnic component the person is indicating a family background. If none of these held, I would simply have to ask the person what they meant. I might want to dialogue with that person's definition, but I don't think I would ever suggest the person is using the term 'incorrectly,' as would be the case were the person saying 'chair' when they mean 'house.'

Reflecting on these thoughts, I see that for me, the designation is tied to people. A person or collectivity can be Anabaptist-Mennonite, whereas it would make no sense to speak of an Anabaptist-Mennonite sky, river or tree (or brick or chair.) There is logic to the idea of Anabaptist-Mennonite singing, art, literature, even an Anabaptist-Mennonite house (home, really); but these make sense only with reference to the human element.

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

Again, what would it mean were a colleague introduced as an 'Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar?' I guess I would go through the same thoughts as above, and add to those the possibility that the person specifically studies Anabaptist-Mennonite people in some way. During the years that 16th and 17th century Reformation radicals were the focus of my scholarly work, I would have said that I did work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar. I agonized

long and hard about how my work as an historian and theologian contributed to the well-being of the Mennonite church and allowed that to guide my choice of topics, if not my methodology. Having moved from theology into social work, I haven't thought seriously about it since. I have to answer no, therefore; I do not work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar. On the other hand, it is obvious that even my very choice of social work as a second career move was guided by that cluster of values preferences mentioned above - simplicity, nonviolence, service, communalism, concern for social justice and I do strive to embody those values in my professional life and am quite clear in my desire to infect my students with these values. I would say, therefore, that I work unself-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar, and am happy to report that this feels much better.

Daniel Liechty
Professor, Department of Social Work
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Where practice is truer than doctrine

To be honest, I'm not sure why I answered Lydia's questions in the first place, why I agreed to respond to her published summary, or why it seems right to begin confessionally now--though her conclusion invited it. Perhaps the deeply-engrained tug of mutual accountability is at work, even in a network whose members I scarcely know but whose on-going conversation is somehow important. In that respect, Lydia's summary reinforced my sense of being at least three worlds apart.

I live in a place that has no long history of Mennonite settlement; it is far from Winnipeg and Waterloo; its congregation struggles with theological identity and flagging membership. I teach at a Lutheran university, having had no direct experience with Mennonite educational institutions since high school. Moreover, my academic training and research is mainly in subjects unknown, perhaps antithetical, to traditional Mennonite theology: international relations and political philosophy.

I must have been among those respondents who ventured a qualified 'yes' to the question of

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continued on page 3. . .

“... an attentiveness to the ‘underside of modern international relations’ populated by pacifists, peasants, revolutionaries, and cultural ‘others’”

self-conscious identification as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar. Honesty would have required it. My one close friend of Mennonite background in my own academic field would, I'm sure, resist the label, though he once admonished me to 'be proud of your heritage' after reading a draft essay in which I had substituted a generic reference for what only he and I, among likely readers, knew to be Mennonite. (Chastened, I fixed it.)

The qualifications could go on. There is my old graduate-school attraction to the forbidden fruit of Augustine; my encounters with criticisms of modernity that seem to implicate Anabaptist voluntarism; my frustration at what I have called the incorrigible statism of Mennonite 'political thought,' again very modern, conflating politics with the state and the state, abstracted from history, with the sword.

And yet. . . I'm not sure I could disown the adjective Anabaptist-Mennonite even if such an act of heroic renunciation, self-creation, or self-loathing was really possible. Certainly not the Mennonite part. I'll confess to having been the one who distinguished Anabaptist (a 16th-century 'moment' within the collapse of medieval certainties) from Mennonite (a five-century 'cluster of stories' rooted in the lived experience of real communities). Part of my claim to the adjective is unapologetically communal, though I do not mean by this mere ethnicity; nor do I want to rekindle debate around the false dichotomies of faith and culture. Rather, I mean the powerful, shared identity expressed in hymn and story that, at its best, resembles the aboriginal conception of the world as bound by relations of kinship and adoptive kinship. It is part of who I am. It shapes who I trust, how I think, and what I encounter.

Another part of my Anabaptist-Mennonite claim is, I think, reflected in scholarly orientation and character. Given the risk of caricature in generalizations of this kind, I'll simply suggest some of my own, diverse commitments: a hermeneutic sensibility that knows the importance of words and meanings; an attentiveness to the 'underside of modern international relations' populated by pacifists, peasants, revolutionaries, and cultural 'others'; a desire for gentleness as well as truth-telling; a scholarship that accepts accountability to a larger community and is articulate about matters of the good; a preference for collegial over hierarchical modes of university governance.

Any claim to Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar-

ship, finally, must also conjure with theology. This is difficult and dangerous to do, but not because, as might be assumed stereotypically, I have been exposed to too much scepticism in the 'secular university,' or because I share the vocational afflictions that make academics into notoriously bad church members. Rather, it is difficult and dangerous in a short essay, in the fixity of print, because of the great inhibitions posed by my own recent experience of church and conference, where theology is engaged by checklist, biblicism conflated with literalism, and confessions of faith used to punish and draw lines of exclusion. Thus my fear of substantive definition. Mennonite circles are awash in theological cliches and abstractions--liberal ones too. Against all this, I confess that I do not, yet, have words to speak economically and authentically about all that is most important: What does it mean to know God? To follow Jesus? To be the church? I wonder, too, but struggle to ask, whether the richness of Mennonites' theological inheritance is to be found where preachers are mostly silent, where practice is truer than doctrine, where the metaphoric and real graces of worship, hospitality, care, work, and habitation in the world still shape lives of exemplary piety.

Roger Epp

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Reflections from Islamic studies

How I see myself working as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar obviously depends to a considerable extent on what my definition of Mennonite would be. I find myself agreeing most with those mentioned by Lydia as placing the emphasis on personal identity, including all "who trace their spiritual, cultural or genealogical roots to the Anabaptist movement or any of its many manifestations since then." While I have lived in Montreal as a student at McGill I have not actively participated in a worshipping community that claims the Anabaptist theological heritage as its own, but have rather been participating in one that claims the Plymouth Brethren heritage. My childhood and adolescent years, however, were spent within a large Mennonite

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“I find myself therefore more heavily influenced by intellectual currents in the evangelical circles (broadly defined) than by those in specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite circles.”

community in the Hague-Osler region north of Saskatoon, SK on the Canadian Prairies. The worshipping communities in which I actively participated at that time were all very firmly from the Mennonite tradition, and therefore very formative in my development. In fact, I would consider my choice to participate in the Plymouth Brethren community consistent with my heritage because of the similarities I found, making me feel very much "at home." Does the fact that I consider myself a Mennonite affect my work as a scholar? Yes, in the sense that I am of the opinion that all that I am affects my work in some way.

Do I work self-consciously as a Mennonite scholar? Not if that means I deliberately view my subject material from a viewpoint dominated by the emphases attributed by Lydia to H. S. Bender's work. But yes in the sense that I will choose to explore issues that involve Mennonites or Mennonite history in some way. First I will deal with my negative statement. None of my education has been in a Mennonite institution, since I chose to study first at interdenominational confessional schools, and then at a "secular" liberal arts institution. I would say that I rather work self-consciously as a Christian scholar.

My field is Islamic Studies, and major concerns of mine are the history of Muslim-Christian interaction and Muslim and Christian (mis)perceptions of each other. I would also see myself working specifically as an Evangelical scholar since this label is one with which I identify myself more deliberately. I find myself therefore more heavily influenced by intellectual currents in the evangelical circles (broadly defined) than by those in specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite circles. I find evangelical discussions on pluralism, missiology, the historical Jesus, the development of doctrine, and historiography relevant to my research and writing. Naturally, this would include scholarship by Evangelicals who also happen to be Mennonite.

Where I do work self-consciously as a Mennonite would be in choosing research topic exploring the history of Mennonite interaction with Muslims, as a subset of the broader Christian-Muslim interaction. However since this interaction is very limited prior to the present century--Mennonite immigrants in the Ukraine and Central Asia, and Dutch missionaries in what is now Indonesia being notable exceptions--there is not much material to work with. Even this century, there has been little Mennonite scholarship on

Islam apart from a few such as David W. Shenk and Gordon Nickel, the latter having just recently published a book that masterfully draws together a range of Mennonite writings on Islam and weaves them into a comprehensive statement on mission in that context. That leaves a scholar of Islamic history little material with which to work from a specifically Mennonite viewpoint, though the growth of national Mennonite churches in Muslim contexts in Africa, South Asia, and Indonesia certainly needs further exploration.

Another reason for the absence of specifically Mennonite reflection in my scholarship would be that my studies till now have tended to be more descriptive than prescriptive, more from a historical or phenomenological perspective than a theological or ethical perspective, more answering questions of what was (and is) than what should be. I anticipate that those latter questions will be addressed later once the initial foundation is laid, and I may well find that Mennonite instincts will surface more then. I have found recent discussions with men such as Jon Bonk, and a recent encounter with the writings of John H. Yoder (through a paper by a Baptist theologian interestingly) stimulating and holding out promise of fruitful discovery in their intersection with Islamic studies, when I have the time to give them the attention they deserve.

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A certain 'odor'

To be self-consciously Anabaptist-Mennonite in one's scholarship; is it a characteristic, a milieu, a perspective, a paradigm, an agenda? Is it a specifiable subset of one's beliefs, or is it something which—to borrow an image from Maurice Merleau-Ponty—spreads over one's scholarly work, and indeed, over one's life, like an odor or a sound?

Whatever the case may be, I have found it in my own experience to be both accident and choice. John Howard Yoder provided me with my preferred moniker; he once referred to me as Mennonite "not according to the flesh." I was born and raised in a rather benign small-town

continued on page 5 . . .

Methodism, and came into contact with Mennonites as a teenager when I attended a Mennonite high school. Continuing Mennonite education at the college level brought me together both with my wife (a Mennonite “according to the flesh”) and with the intellectual and cultural fallout of Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision*, along with its refraction through the Concern movement and its “New Left” heirs of the sixties and seventies. With many fits and starts, I have remained a child of these circumstances by accident, but also an adherent by choice.

This is not so different, of course, from the experience of many Mennonites, whether according to or not according to the flesh. Being born and raised here can seem just as much an accident as my ending up here because of the course of my adolescence. We find ourselves here by accident and by choice. The larger problem is that the topography of the site where we find ourselves is so much more complicated than this. As a social theorist by profession, my focus of attention has been the overlapping sociocultural identifications which contribute to this complication. If asked for my current “take,” I would be tempted to characterize the Anabaptist-Mennonite “odor” in my experience as a certain Christocentric “*Will-to-Community*,” which we do not yet know how to hold in the same embrace with our liberal individualism. I am both sympathetic to and skeptical of attempts somehow to choose between the two. Perhaps, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, it’s not that we *are* Anabaptist-Mennonite, but that we are always *becoming* so.

But such reflections already flow in the direction of substantive claims that would *fix* the odor or the sound, that would potentially reduce it to a reading on a meter, or more commonly, to a list of theses that one might nail to a church door. I would guess that such fixing is both beneficial and unavoidable, and I certainly do not avoid it myself. My concern here, however, is that any such fixing always be accompanied by the ongoing sense that the Other of the discursive, always escaping the thematizing grasp, is the *lived*, again to use Merleau-Ponty’s terminology (cf. his *Phenomenology of Perception*). Just as the embodied life of an individual brings with it “a certain style,” which for discursive fixation provides an “inexhaustible ground,” so the lives that are lived in sites marked by Anabaptist-Mennonite identification will always overflow both confessions and dissertations. Not only are we more than Anabaptist-Mennonite, as if our

lives had many distinguishable facets. Anabaptist-Mennonite is always more than we can say. *We* are always more than we can say, by accident and by choice.

Peter C. Blum
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Improvements to the database

Please take a few minutes to make any corrections or updates on your personal data sheet return your data sheets and return it along with membership fees in the enclosed envelopes. Thank you. There have been a few changes in the data we are collecting:

- The category “Periods” had been deleted (ancient, medieval, modern, etc.) It seemed that the primary department and research interests already indicated the periods in which individual scholars are interested.
- We have added a new category: “Past occupations.” As this is new category, the options provided are starting points. Please use the “other” space to add further general options. Check the boxes of those occupations which have been your *primary* occupations in the past.
- There is a new question: Please identify the congregation, with denominational affiliation, you are active in (if any). As this Network tries to wrestle with the relationship of church/faith and academic scholarship, this seems to be a basic piece of information. Please note that this Network is open to *anyone* who identifies themselves as an “Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar;” involvement in a Mennonite congregation is not a requirement.

A few reminders:

- Please list *all* your post-secondary degrees, not just your most advanced degree. One important trend to track is how many people in this database who have bachelors or masters degrees from particular colleges/universities.
- Under “Primary department,” please try to restrict your answer to as few choices as possible. Check more than one if you need to, but use the “Methods/Research Areas” to list secondary interests.

“... a certain Christocentric ‘*Will-to-Community*,’ which we do not yet know how to hold in the same embrace with our liberal individualism.”

upcoming events

Send us
your
announcements, job
openings and
publishing
notes.
The next
newsletter
will be
published in
December.

June 15-18, 2000

"An Anabaptist Vision for the New Millennium: a Search for Identity" is the title of a symposium to be held on the campus of Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. Designed to facilitate a 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 church landscape. Among the presenters are Arnold Snyder, Paulus Widjaja, Marlene Kropf, Harry Huebner, Malinda Berry, Abraham Friesen, Chu-wang Pam, Brenda Martin Hurst, and Glen Stassen. Registration and additional information is available from Dale Schrag at 316-284-5356, drs@bethelks.edu

October 17-18, 2000

J.J. Thiessen lectures at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg. The speaker will be William Brown, Old Testament scholar from Union Theological Seminary, Virginia.

January 29 - February 2, 2001

Pastors' Week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. The speaker is Walter Wink. For more information, call 219-295-3726.

Call for Papers

Proposals are hereby solicited for a meeting of the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association, to be held in June of 2001, at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, PA. The theme is: "Individual and Community: Anabaptist Perspectives and Experience." The meeting will be held in conjunction with a Young Center conference, "Amish, Old Orders, and the Media: Conflicts of Interest?" which will be **June 14-16, 2001**. Membership in ASAA is open to anyone who is strongly interested in Sociology or Anthropology and in the traditions historically associated with the Anabaptist movement.

Deadline for submission of proposals is January 15, 2001. Submissions should be sent to: Peter Blum; Hillsdale College; 33 E. College St.; Hillsdale, MI 49242. Email: peter.blum@hillsdale.edu
The *full* call for papers is at:
www.hillsdale.edu/Dept/Soc/asaa/CICall.htm

new journals, book notes

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

will be launched in fall 2000 by the Institute of Mennonite Studies, Elkhart, Ind., and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Man. This journal will be published twice a year with the goal of helping church leaders reflect theologically on the identity, mission and practices of the church from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective.

Published biannually, it will foster continuing efforts of church leaders to articulate an Anabaptist/Christian-based theology for church practices such as worship, preaching, membership, baptism, community, prayer and counseling. The first issue will focus on "spirituality," including how congregational leaders can help people make choices about the various forms and approaches to spirituality that are present in our culture. The second issue will focus on the eucharist and the third on Christian transformation.

For information about how to subscribe, contact CMBC, gzerbe@mennonitechurch.ca; or the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, bngingerich@ambs.edu.

The first online issue of **Mennonite Life** (not a new journal, but now published solely electronically) is now available at

www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/

Books

Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom. By **Mark D. Baker**. InterVarsity Press.

Tunas Yang Tumbuh (The Growing Shoot: a history of the Muria Christian Churches in Indonesia), 2 Vol. By **Lawrence M. Yoder**.

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