Theological Reflections of a CO: Changing Peace Theology since World War II

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Caught Off-Guard

World War II caught our Mennonite communities off guard. We noticed world affairs only as they impinged directly on our immediate communities because we lived in relative isolation from the rest of the world. As much as we could, we made our communities self-sufficient. As a result our church communities were largely preoccupied with internal affairs: with supporting economically struggling families, learning to meld the early and later Mennonite groups, and seeking to maintain the faith in a new and rapidly changing society.

We were not prepared for war, for objection to war, for giving a reason for our faith, for speaking with the non-Mennonite world about war, for challenging the mindset of a country at war, or for giving an alternative to violent responses to conflict. All we knew as youth was that we were against war and should not be expected to participate in the war. After all, we were exempt from war on the basis of the "Privilegium" granted to the Mennonites when they entered Canada.

But the Government of Canada, in its wisdom, decided that it would only be fair for every applicant for Conscientious Objector status (CO) to show that they were worthy of exemption from military service.² Consequently, in Manitoba we were asked to appear before a judge who interrogated us and tried to determine whether we were genuine religious conscientious objectors.³

We did not do well in answering the questions of the judges – at least not in terms of the world-view that *they* brought to current events and to *their* interpretation of Scripture.⁴ We were not able to verbalize our theology to ourselves (because it was taken for granted in the Mennonite community) let alone to outsiders (with whom we had little contact). We were not prepared to respond to the apparent inconsistencies of our position when the judge wanted to know how we reconciled accepting a police force but not the army or how we reconciled having been in a fight at one time but not fighting in the army.

Our world view as youth of that day was indeed limited. Few of us had any real knowledge of the big cities, of federal affairs or of other nations (I had never even been to Winnipeg at age 18). What vision we had was related to how to serve the community in which we lived, and how we could insulate ourselves against negative influences that came from the outside world (fluctuating prices for produce, land indebtedness and rising fuel prices).⁵

We were not helped much by the church. The church leaders were very active in meeting with government officials and in seeking to supply ministers to accompany the boys to the alternative service camps, but they did not help us face situations they had not faced themselves. The Mennonite Churches also were not all on the same page: The descendants of the early 1870s immigrants wanted exemption on the basis of the "Privelegium" but would accept alternative service if it was not under military supervision, whereas the immigrants from the 1920s were much more ready to accept alternative service even if it was under the military and required military training. Representations were made to government but not in a united way.

The government made arrangements for those recognized as COs to be given Alternative Service Work (ASW). They were paid \$15.00-\$25.00 a month with the rest of their salary diverted to the Red Cross. The first groups of COs were sent to work in provincial parks.8 Here they built roads, cleared bush and beautified the parks. Later, some worked on farms, in mines, in packing plants, in hospitals and sanitariums, and some enlisted in the army after a stint in camp or they joined the medical corpse.

What we did fairly well was to live what we understood to be a Christian life. The theology was lived rather than spoken. Evidence of this is the testimony given to workers in the camps, in mines, on farms and in hospitals and in whatever work was assigned to COs. Even the innocence of our answers spoke well for us and was more effective than more sophisticated answers would have been.

Early Awakenings

ASW had the effect of taking us out of our comfort zone. We had to answer to people whose world-view differed from ours and who rejected our arguments from Scripture. We had to find reasons for our beliefs that would be acceptable to our discussion partners, whether friends or judges. We were forced to think more theologically about peace and non-resistance. We began to verbalize the faith to ourselves and to give reasons for our faith to people of non-Mennonite background, representatives of this larger society, such as Judge

John E. Adamson and Dr. Herbert W. Wadge, the author of *Should a Christian Fight*?¹¹ We realized we needed a greater understanding of the Scripture as a whole, rather than just citing individual verses to support our non-resistant position.¹² Our understanding of Scripture was nevertheless more in terms of a listing of doctrines than of theology.

Contact with non-Mennonites awakened in us a respect for persons of other denominations that we had not been able to exercise in our closed communities. We realized that the original inhabitants of the land were given Reserves to live on, just like the Mennonites had been when they first settled in Manitoba and the treaties with them were broken just as the 'Privilegium' was broken for the Mennonites, ¹³ but in a much more tragic way. We also gained a new appreciation for patients in the so called Mental Hospitals. These were new understandings that would eventually bear fruit in the church and society.

We gained a new sense of civic responsibility. We had been asked to serve the country and were given alternative service possibilities, but we began to see our responsibility in a much broader perspective. Questions of justice and advocacy for the defenseless surfaced. COs looked for ways to make a more significant contribution to society. Some felt that the assigned work was not meaningful enough and certainly not urgently required, when compared with the sacrifices made by the soldiers. Many more in ASW would have been willing to serve overseas in a medical corpse if they had not been required to wear the army uniform and take basic military training. Those working in Mental Hospitals felt that patients were often treated as sub-human and those who were tree-planting felt this work could wait. In these cases, however, the long-term benefits of their service were much greater than the COs at that time could have imagined.

The Legacy of the CO years

The one thing the ASW program did was to change the response of the public to the "German" pacifists who were suspected of being Nazi sympathizers or collaborators. The early response of some was to burn the German language books in our public schools and to vandalize churches. Later, government leaders and local residents praised the COs for the service they had rendered. Animosity was laid to rest.¹⁴

Another result of the ASW program was that it changed the lives of the participants.¹⁵ They were not only uprooted, probably never to return to their previous occupations, but their lives were turned to an entirely new direction. Almost to a person they speak of a change that affected their entire life and their outlook on it. They experienced a

spiritual renewal and their peace and non-resistant position took on a height and breadth that they had not anticipated. They became active participants in the life of the church and the churches' youth programs especially benefited from their participation. Their vocational world had been enlarged to the point where Mennonites can be found in most of the vocations, including those previously off limits for Mennonites (police, law, bartender for example).

For many COs the line between sacred and secular was removed. Peace-making and evangelism (or mission work) were no longer seen as contradictory. Both needed to be affirmed. But it did make a difference as to how we viewed evangelism and missions. We could no longer see it as a one way presentation. It could only be as a witness in which other persons were listened to and not only preached to. Their vocations whether as missionaries, church workers, teachers, social workers or factory workers were all seen as a call to serve the Lord. It is surprising how many ASW workers later went into vocations of service or into full time work as pastors, missionaries or work in Para-church organizations.¹⁹

The ASW (or Civilian Public Service in the United States) experience resulted in a new world-awareness that quickly translated into programs of service at home and abroad. MCC relief and Resettlements Programs were possibilities already during the war.²⁰ Voluntary Service²¹, Mennonite Disaster Service,²² Pax, Teachers Abroad Program,²³ International Voluntary Service,²⁴ Missionary service,²⁵ are some of the programs started or extended because of a new interest in service on the part of ASWs and their generation. Even those who stayed on the farm had a new vision of their work in agriculture and its relevance to the needs of the world.²⁶

A lot of work has also been done to give reasons for our faith, both in terms that speak to the Mennonite church, to other denominations and to the non-Christian world. Scripture is being interpreted more contextually and its expression has become less wooden. Peace and non-violence are seen as vital for all Christians and also for non-Christians. It was not meant to be a unique teaching of the Mennonite Church but of the gospel itself. The theology of peace and non-violence is rooted in the theology of the cross of Christ.

The women²⁷ began to join the men in service to others because they sensed such service to be a true expression of the Christian faith. Peace and non-violence also related to how one dealt with mentally disadvantaged persons,²⁸ how one related to other races and strangers,²⁹ how one served as an employee, one's responsibilities as an employer, how one conducted business and one's professional work.³⁰

Where Are We Now?

We were not ready to answer for our faith when World War II fever and expectations hit our communities. I would suggest that we are no more ready to face the present war fever, the search for security and our own involvements in society from a Christian point of view. A lot of work has been done, but a lot more needs to be done on many fronts to be able to be convincing about peace, non-resistance and non-violence in the swirl of violence that envelope the globe.

Considerable progress has been made since World War II in developing a more adequate peace theology. John Howard Yoder,³¹ the Peace Teams³² and the various theology faculties³³ were hard at work on this topic. Bible Schools were upgraded to College level, indicating that students had to be prepared beyond their High School to work in the world in which they would be called to serve.³⁴ The wealth of literature devoted to a fuller understanding of the Anabaptist heritage (its hermeneutic, its emphasis on discipleship, the centrality of Christ) has helped to focus on a new understanding of the Way of the Cross. Peace and non-violence can no longer be seen as an add-on to the Gospel.³⁵ It is integral to an understanding of the atonement itself. It is no longer a peculiar teaching of the Mennonites (or the Peace Churches) but a call of the gospel to peace and non-violence to all people.

The sad part is that we have not yet learned to live according to this new understanding of peace. It has not yet become a part of our operational life. We still live duplicitous lives. This can best be illustrated in what happened in Winnipeg during the time of the 'War and Conscientious Objector" conference in October 2006. Franklin Graham was conducting a Christian campaign in which he was calling people to commit themselves to Christ. At the same time he was known to have called people to follow the god of war in encouraging the authorities to use the most deadly of weapons against the so called "terrorists". This amounts to worshiping both God and Mammon. We share in this duplicity in that the Mennonite Churches are co-operating with this mission.³⁶

Strong steps have also been taken in our dialogue with non-Mennonite denominations. It began in the area of foreign missions where comity arrangements were worked out by the various mission agencies and where there was an exchange in mission strategy and theology. Since then informal discussions have occurred with various agencies and denominations, ³⁷ including the Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist and Roman Catholic Churches. Discussions and programs have also been worked out on the local levels of church relations. Mennonites have contributed to an understanding of peace and non-violence that is at least being heard or considered by other Christians around the world. It has led to the WCC declaring this to be the decade of peace. ⁴⁰

This is a hopeful sign. But again our practice is not in line with discussions that have taken place. Most Mennonites still think of peace and non-violence as a Mennonite emphasis and somehow cannot fully rejoice when the rest of the world chides us for not having proclaimed the Gospel of peace more loudly. We need a mindset that expects all Christians and all people to abhor the taking of life.

Even though the dialogue with the Aboriginal people of the land was largely one-sided at first (in the early missionary style), there has been further dialogue in which a deeper and fuller understanding of native spirituality was sought. There have been attempts to show solidarity with Aboriginal peoples in their quest for justice with respect to their land entitlements. ⁴¹ But we cannot claim to have overcome a prevailing racism and a not so subtle discrimination against Aboriginal peoples.

Discussions with representatives of Judaism and of the Muslim faiths have resulted in greater knowledge and understanding of each other's faith, but they have not yet developed into a base for joint action.⁴² Surely, the God that members of each of these three religions worship is a God of peace. How could it be otherwise? Again, should we not expect all religions to be centered on peace, justice and non-violence? Nothing else makes sense.

So much of our present population in North America claims to be non-religious. A common ploy is to castigate Christians (and other religious groups) for seeking to influence or impose their ethical perspectives on public issues and policies. But the actions of the non-religious participants in the public discussion can be seen as equally imposing their views and moral values on public issues and policies. In this sense they act as non-religious faiths and are equally active in evangelizing others. But it is true that we have not done well in discussing what belongs to truth, justice, the common good and what properly belong to "civil religion." 44 As long as there are nation states, they will require some form of civil religion on the basis of which to promote the common good and to counter evil and violence. 45 We have done very little to critique civil religion or to nudge it in a more fruitful direction.

Places where we Fear to Tread

Other challenges we have studiously avoided. The Church in North America has hardly even begun to think through its complicity with the violence perpetrated by our involvement in a capitalist free-enterprise economic system.⁴⁶ It may be possible for a Christian to participate in the system without volitionally doing violence to anyone but the system as a system does a lot of violence to the poor and the defenseless in

developed as well as in underdeveloped countries. We need to be concerned about structures of systemic evil⁴⁷ and not only about individual choices. The weapons of imperialism today are largely economic (oil, food, medicine). Here we have been assimilated to society to such an extent that we can no longer speak to it.

In many respects the power brokers of the world are now the heads of Multi-national corporations: corporations that have rights but few responsibilities other than to their shareholder. They are in a position to exploit other people and lands that do not have the protection we have in developed countries. If a country tries to set limits on their actions they simply move the head-office to another country so as to escape any limitations on what they can do. We have not been very successful as churches in addressing Multi-National Corporation in their Board Rooms or their Annual General Meetings or through the governments of our nations. But Multi-National Corporations, because of their unlimited power, have a golden opportunity to work for the common good of the people in every land in which they operate. We have to find a way to invite, rather than to force, corporations to be honorable citizens working for the common good. It is to their own health and welfare to honor such appeals.

When so many of the structures of our society are adversarial in their very nature, how can we even talk about peace and non-violence? It is next to impossible to seek justice for other people without litigation. We are asked to learn to fight each other to accomplish just goals. We are asked to do evil in order to do good! The legal system and the political system are prime examples of adversarial structures that militate against doing things in a peaceful and non-violent way. It is a game of power and the one who wins in court is not necessarily right or just. The one who wins in an election does not necessarily represent a democratic choice. If we are to be a peaceful and non-violent people we will need to overcome the adversarial structures of society and replace them with relationships that are more just and equitable for all people.

Our ecological footprints are nothing to boast about. We do violence to the very "Garden" we were called to till and to keep. Peace and non-violence should also include the environment. The Mennonite world was doing better at a time when diversified farming was done with horses and small implements. We hardly know now what we are doing to the land with our use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizer of all kinds. We know we are polluting the air, the water, the soil and our food. But we cannot have peace without having peace with the air, the water, the soil and with the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and the animals of the land. We were created as moral agents and were given responsibility over the things God created but there will be no

"shalom" for us if this governance of what was entrusted to humans is not managed in the direction of God's purpose and will. As a Christian community we should be at the forefront of ecological responsibility.⁵⁰

We need to take peacemaking to a new level. It is not something that comes into play only when there is conflict. Our schools, Colleges and University have paid attention to the theology of peace, non-violence and conflict resolution. This is commendable and needs to be increased. But much more research needs to be done into what makes for peace in our personal lives, in family relations, in our extended families, in our communities, nations and between people all over the world. We need to know what leads to violence in our marriages, families, churches, places of work and in society. It is here that we need to practice the character traits that are the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Should we not spend as much money and effort in researching the road to peace as the world spends in researching the road to ever more devastating wars?

And what shall we say about the powers of darkness that reside in our culture of individualism, relativism, materialism, consumerism and nationalism linked to an industrial military complex that is to provide the security for us to live on an exploitatively high standard-of-living with impunity? We will not be able to engage these powers by calling individuals to Christ and let them struggle on their own. The whole Body of Christ, the church, is called upon to align itself with him who has already conquered the world in his life and death on the cross. The church is needed as never before to be a discerning community committed to *be* God's people in the world.

The question then arises, how are we ever going to take on all the powers of evil of our day? How are we going to engage all the dysfunctional structures of modern society? The fact is that that is not our job. We are not called to lord it over others. We are not called to make history come out right. That is what God will do. Better said, that is what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Christ has overcome the principalities and powers of evil in that he has overcome the world through his death on the cross. It is in Jesus' willingness to suffer and to die and his refusal to do evil, that evil itself has been overcome. The resurrection of Jesus was God's affirmation that Jesus was victorious over sin and death.

We are called to be the church and to be Christian in the world. What we need to overcome is our fear of suffering. Once we are fully convinced that our security is in Christ and that he has overcome the world, we are free to be obedient to the call of Christ and to participate in the reign of God on earth. Then, wherever there are COs, conscientious objectors, who say "no" to evil, God will be taking

on these structures of evil and work to bring about God's shalom in the world. Then, when we naively do what we feel to be right before God and humanity, as we did in the 1940s, we will be addressing the whole panorama of evil and it will be a sign of what God is doing to redeem the world. I invite the church and you personally, to become a CO in Christ.

I am so glad that God has given us children and grandchildren. They are deeply into the world as we at that time were not. They are better informed, more experienced and better equipped to speak to the issues of today and the years to come. They will be led of the Spirit of God to know what belongs to God and what does not belong to God in structures of society. When they, in the name of Christ, speak their "no" to evil, God will hear and will take on powers of darkness. Revelation 18 speaks of the complex structures of society that have been taken captive by Satan as "the city of Babylon. And we are told that God will bring down the city of Babylon and will bring forth a new heaven and a new earth and God's reign of love, justice and peace will be established on earth forever.

Praise be to God. And all the people said Amen!

Notes

- The Militia Act of 1793 exempted Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren in Christ from military service and the Order-in-Council of 1873 granted exemption to all Kanadier Mennonites.
- The new Military Service Act of 1917 exempted anyone who "conscientiously objects to the undertaking of combat service...by the tenets and articles of faith...or any organized religious denomination existing and well recognized in Canada...to which he in good faith belongs." See also John A. Toews, *Alternative Service in Canada during World War II* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, nd), 41.
- The Order in Council P.C. 1822 of March 1941, and subsequent regulations, required that all COs were to appear before a judge before being assigned to Alternative Service
- For examples of encounters with judges see: David Schellenberg, fond 1015-13, Mennonite Heritage Center) and the Ruben Siemens encounter documented in John C. Klassen and Jake Kreuger, *Alternative Service Memoirs* (n.p., 1995), 301.
- These were met by organizations such as the Reinland Agricultural Society, the various Consumers Co-ops and the Credit Unions.
- Oavid P. Reimer, Experiences of the Mennonites in Canada during the Second World War1939-1945
- Jibid and T.D. Regehr, Mennonites in Canada: A People Transformed, 1939-1970: (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 37-40
- ⁸ The first ASW camps opened in June, 1941: Montreal River, ON; Riding Mountain National Park, MB; Lac la Ronge, SK; and Jasper National Park, AB
- ⁹ Relatively few discipline problems were reported in the camps.
- See the tribute given by the Honorable Humphrey Mitchell, minister of Labour, after the war in Toews, op cite. P. 110.

- Dr. Herbert W. Wadge, Should a Christian Fight? The Position of Conscientious Objectors (Winnipeg: Hignell, 1946). This volume, underwritten by Judge Adamson, seeks to give the "correct" answer to biblical passages used by COs to support their beliefs. Though the book was published in 1946 some form of it must have been circulated earlier in that we were well aware of these counter arguments.
- Church attendance, youth work and catechism were of increased importance at this time.
- Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada 1978-1920: The History of a separate People (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 333-364. For a different perspective see: J. L. Granatstein and J. M. Hitsman, Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1985).
- See the "Contribution and Achievements of Alternative Service" in Toews, Alternative Service, 105ff. The alternativeservice.ca website seeks in a number of pages to assess the actual material contributions made by the COs to the national domestic products.
- See especially Klassen and Kreuger, *Alternative Service Memoirs* and A. J. Klassen, ed., *Alternative Service for Peace in Canada during World War II 1941-1946* (Abbotsford: Mennonite Central Committee (BC) Seniors for Peace, 1998).
- Henry C. Born, despite being jailed, found his beliefs strengthened. See, Klassen, Alternative Service, 1998.
- Bethel Mennonite Church's youth group numbered close to 100; many of these were in ASW.
- In 1941 many Mennonite teachers lost their teaching certificates; later they came to represent a higher than average percentage of teachers in Winnipeg of any of the ethnic groups.
- Of the close to 30 ASWs at St. Boniface Hospital in St. Boniface, MB well over half went into full time church work.
- This was an early possibility for service abroad.
- This was spearheaded by CPS workers and churches in the US and resulted in the General Conference Mennonite Church and MCC opening up four summer VS possibilities in Canada in 1948.
- See "Mennonite Disaster Service," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, (GAMEO).
- Both Pax and Teachers Abroad Program were MCC programs. See Calvin W. Redekop, *The Pax Story: Service in the Name of Christ 1951-1976*, Telford: Pandora Press. 2001.
- ²⁴ See "International Voluntary Service," Mennonite Encyclopedia,. IV
- See article by Leonard Doell, this issue. Also, see: Anna Ens, Anna, In Search of Unity: Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1996 p.114
- Regier, Mennonites in Canada, 125ff reporting a new Mennonite appreciation for the importance of agriculture in the world economy.
- The effect the war had on Mennonite women and what they suffered while their husbands were away on ASW assignments are documented by Regehr, Mennonites in Canada and Klassen and Kreuger, Alternative Service Memoirs; and Klassen, Alternative Service for Peace in Canada, 31-275
- World War II focused Mennonite attention on the mentally ill.
- ²⁹ Se the testimonies given by various COs in *alternativeservice.ca* "So What" New Understandings, p. 1-3.
- The original MEDA emerged in 1952 as a response to requests from Mennonites in Paraguay for assistance from North American Mennonite entrepreneurs.
- John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Willard Swartley, ed., Essays on Peace Theology and Witness (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1968).

- Peace teams were organized in the US and Canada in 1948-49 to visit the churches and to remind them of the importance of the Mennonite heritage of Peace and Non-resistance.
- Mennonite Brethren Bible College and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, both founded in the 1940s, emphasized courses on peace and non-violence.
- 34 It was now assumed that missionaries and pastors needed such further training to be effective communicators in their work.
- 35 Yoder, The Politics of Jesus; J. Denny Weaver, Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the late Nineteenth Century (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1997); C. Norman Kraus, Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1987).
- ³⁶ Note Gerhard Neufeld's letter titled"Beware Franklin Graham" in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, October 14, 2006.
- James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky and Charles E. van Engen, eds., Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006). Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop and John Howard Yoder, A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal has Begun (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1991).
- Mennonites have participated in international dialogues with the Baptist World Alliance (1989-1992); World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1983-1984); the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City, Rome (1998-2003); the Lutheran World Federation (2005-present). See Mennonite World Conference materials. A national dialogue with Lutherans has taken place in Germany, USA and France.
- One such group is meeting in Winnipeg.
- ⁴⁰ This was brought onto the WCC program by Fernando Enns.
- ⁴¹ MCC Canada's Menno Wiebe and others researched Aboriginal land entitlements and helped negotiate with the government.
- Fred Stambrook, ed., A Sharing of Diversities: Proceedings of the Jewish Mennonite Ukrainian Conference, Building Bridges (Regina: U Regina, 1995) and Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, eds., A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1997).
- 43 See: Marilyn McLaren, "Ideology ignores facts on insurance," Winnipeg Free Press, October 14, 2006.
- ⁴⁴ I am not referring to a rightist evangelical stance that worships the capitalist free-enterprise system and hides behind a hijacked democratic system.
- 45 Some form of civil religion is a must in a pluralistic society otherwise the many factions cannot live in peace together. If one faith or ideology is imposed on a nation without the possibility of descent, it will likely lead to conflict, rebellion or war.
- ⁴⁶ See Henry Rempel, *A High Price for Abundant Living: The Story of Capitalism* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁷ See: Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Rempel, *A High Price*.
- ⁴⁸ Levitt, Kari, *Silent Surrender: The Multinational Corporation in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970).
- ⁴⁹ Rempel, A High Price, 210 quotes a 1999 issue of The Economist, "modern computer and telecommunications make capital controls impossible to enforce; networked multinationals are creating a borderless world, forcing governments to compete for investment."
- See Calvin Redekop, ed., Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2000).