Mennonite Studies: Preparing for the Next Agenda

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In the Epilogue of *Mennonites in Canada*, Vol. II, Frank H. Epp observes that the Mennonite vision in Canada (should we not say everywhere?) was always greater than the reality. He suggests that at the heart of our religious culture there is a core reality "which envisioned the Kingdom of God on earth." Epp went on to observe that this core reality was threatened because Mennonites were limiting and in the process emasculating, or short-circuiting, that Kingdom."

The issue of limiting or short-circuiting the Kingdom of God can be addressed at many points. Frank Epp has a fine summary on the last pages of the book. For us at a conference on Mennonite Studies our task is to ask how our scholarship fits into this critique. In particular I want to ask what this might mean for future Mennonite studies. Hence my title: Mennonite studies. Secondly, I want to remind you of the profound cultural crisis which is the setting in which we strive to be creative researchers, thinkers, writers, artists and teachers. Thirdly, I will comment on preparing for the next agenda. My thesis thus is that we have been and are quite successful in Mennonite studies. But the major focus of these studies up to now has been on self-understanding and self-definition. Given the character and scope of the contemporary crisis and my own conviction that as scholars we too have been limiting or short-circuiting the Kingdom, as the next agenda Mennonite studies should become more outer directed and address more forthrightly the questions the world asks, rather than centering in on our own needs. We ought to
become constructive scholars in the sense of creating and implementing new models, concepts and visions for realizing the Kingdom of God on earth in the future.

**Mennonite Studies: the Achievement**

At a conference on Mennonite Studies which is as comprehensive as ours this achievement should be obvious. But we might reflect on the several dimensions of this achievement.

First, there is now a Mennonite intellectual tradition. To be sure, there have been intellectuals at every moment of Mennonite history. And certainly in the Netherlands one can speak of such a tradition since the 17th century. But in North America it is really a 20th century development. It represents a substantial coterie of individuals — still too masculine! — who have mastered academic disciplines, demonstrated intellectual creativity and now accept the responsibility of sharing their knowledge as Mennonites.

Our conference demonstrates that Mennonites have mastered most of the scholarly disciplines. It seems to me, however, we may be slighting Mennonites in Biblical and theological studies since it is hard to think of Mennonite scholarship apart from the Bible and theology. In spite of our alleged Biblicalism, the Bible does not belong to us only. We do read it differently even to the point, as Gordon Kaufman suggests, that we can talk of God as nonresistant.²

I don’t think it is professional pride to observe that the discipline of history, so much in evidence at this conference, has more than any other discipline established the reputation of Mennonite studies. During the past twenty-five years social scientists — sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists and those trained in scientific study of religion — have joined Biblical and theological scholars and historians in expanding Mennonite studies into numerous areas. Now we know not only Mennonite history and thought but something about the family, child rearing, youth, marriage, aging, death, sexual behaviors, male-female roles, eating habits, recreation, occupations, business and farming styles, education, residence patterns, belief systems, language usage, political attitudes, accumulation and distribution of wealth, expenditures of available funds, leadership styles, institution building, urbanization, dependency and independency. There are creative achievements in music, art and fiction. The list is a long one.

The result is that we have created an enormous corpus of material for self-knowledge. There is much material based on solid research. Not all of us are satisfied with the present level of interpretation or that the generalizations are applicable to our own experience. But the point is — Mennonite studies have arrived. The shelves of our libraries are filled with books. The larger world of scholarship reads this material and
understands the story being told. The Canadian church historian John S. Moir caught the message in his 1975 review of Frank Epp's *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*. There he noted "the peculiar nature of Mennonitism—not a sect, not a territorial church, but a supranational (and antinational) religious fellowship and at times, historically, a counter-culture."

Several observations about this achievement might be in place. First, most of this material is of a pragmatic rather than a theoretical character. We are good at description and analysis, less likely to be very speculative or to use the words of one of our speakers, John Warkentin, we are less strong on the reflective, contemplative, the philosophical. Second, Mennonite studies up to now have largely been inner-oriented. Our primary concern has been the development of our identity and boundary-maintenance rather than recasting a tradition for an interested world or comparative studies of Mennonite topics with other groups. Thirdly, most of this work has been done in a context of self-satisfaction. There have been moments of self-doubt and occasional substantive self-criticism but for the most part we have been trying to gain recognition from other Christians, from academics and from the public what we perceived to be our under-rated tradition. Finally, this achievement has taken place in a time of general satisfaction with the character, style and quality of intellectual processes. To be sure there has been betrayal and alienation but most scholars feel comfortable with their tools, respectful of scholarship and rewarded (not always adequately except in Canada!) for their work. The milieu has been congenial and Mennonite scholars have seized the moment.

*Mennonite Studies: the New Context*

One reason why I believe there ought to be and will be a change in future Mennonite studies is because the context in which we will do our work in the future will be markedly different from that of the past. I do not claim any clairvoyance and am aware that there are few sharp breaks in history. But there is change. For instance, most of us are academics. The great years of expansion and generous funding are behind us. The mystique has worn off the university, especially the humanistic disciplines. And all the disciplines have been wracked with defensiveness and self-doubt. The social sciences which have majored in field research are discovering the restiveness of people and institutions who are skeptical about being objects of study and analysis. The lack of coherence in our intellectual life is in part the product of disciplinary identities which battle for survival in the face of diminishing resources. In a larger way the established institutions — governments, corporations, churches, newspapers, banks as well as colleges and universities — are being challenged as to their legitimacy.

All of this is taking place in an atmosphere of apocalyptic pessim-
ism. As the literary critic Frank Kermode has written: “A sense of an ending is the distinctive literary image of our time.” Now we would add that this same spirit is found among many social and natural scientists who are convinced modernity is exhausted as we live in a post-industrial, post-western culture. It is no accident that the top piece of non-fiction this spring is Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth*. Chaim Potok at the end of his wonderful history of the Jews, entitled *Wanderings*, reflects a widespread feeling:

> Everything seems to be in fragments: Judaism, Christiandom, socialism, the secular dream of Hume that man can manage on his own — it is all in pieces around us. We are in an interregnum between worlds, groping about, peering into the future and seeing only our own image vaguely reflected in the dark glass.4

If we add to this catalog the declining influence of American power and influence in the world, the growing impact of LATFRICASIA, the shift in relative levels of prosperity from class and region to region, fears of ecological catastrophe and the global cry for justice — we begin to understand why Hannah Arendt in the year of her death (1975) speculated that “we may well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other.” Lord Eric Ashley put it differently: “The ultimate reality of the present day — the climacteric of mankind — not a crisis but a coalescence of crises, a sea-change in human history.”

Every change of such proportions includes positive developments. Burgeoning literacy rates, global interdependence, the impressive growth of the third church — to use Walbert Bühlemann’s insight — revitalized religions, assertive feminists, innovative Asian industries and greater racial equality are signs that newness and change are possible. Hopelessness then is minimally short-sighted and fundamentally alien to the Christian Gospel.

I don’t want to push this point further. I am convinced the 1980s are significantly different from the 1950s and 1960s. Each of these developments have an impact on Mennonite Studies. Many of our assumptions are no longer relevant. If denominationalism, for instance, is a luxury of Christian dominance and the era of the nation state, some assumptions are no longer relevant. New configurations will be required for the era of global consciousness. New foundations must be developed. As John Stuart Mill wrote over a century ago: “No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their [our] modes of thought.”

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Given our achievement, what do we do next? Have we the practitioners of Mennonite studies limited or short-circuited “envisioning the
Kingdom of God on earth” in our own work? Does Christian faithfulness and the human situation call for something different on our part?

Before probing this, a word on how I conceive Mennonite Studies. It is interesting that up to now in this conference this has been an undefined point. We might well ask what we really mean by Mennonite Studies? Does Mennonite Studies mean any scholarship by Mennonites? Certainly not. Some excellent studies have been produced by individuals quite un-Mennonite. Not all Mennonite scholars are into Mennonite things. Do we then mean any study about Mennonites? Yesterday we were not certain that all genealogy or local history or all opinions expressed merited the title “Mennonite” study. Gerald Friesen also reminded us that we finally have to address who and what is Mennonite.

As a working definition I will propose that “Mennonite Studies” is a field of scholarship which explores, reconstructs and articulates the Mennonite reality that has been, is, or ought to be. This field of study is multi-disciplinary and frequently inter-disciplinary, using any tool or conceptualization based on critical methodology. With this definition in mind I want to mention five considerations as we prepare for the next agenda. Each of these will help find ways, I hope, to “envision the Kingdom of God on earth.”

1. We begin with a well established base for study, research and communication. The collection of primary materials in public, university and church libraries and archives is enormous. The multiplicity of available or soon to be available journals and publication series provide the means for sharing knowledge with each other and the larger world. There are endowments available or in the process of development to support scholarly and popular studies. There is considerable interest in what we produce. And there is a growing number of individuals, men, women, ethnic minorities, and third world Mennonites who are making Mennonite topics and concerns the focal point of their scholarship.

2. A community of commitment and interest has survived. In spite of much travail, too much fragmentation and inadequate fulfillment of the vision, there is a worldwide peoplehood. Mennonite studies will ultimately thrive only within a people. Dostoevsky once observed that when an individual leaves the people he becomes an atheist. It is not necessary to be a Mennonite to do Mennonite studies. But this will not be a vital field of study apart from this interested constituency. There will be angles of vision within Mennonite studies that can only be recognized and understood by participatory scholars.

3. Mennonite studies will rarely be a popular cause. A minority is a minority, even in scholarship. Some of our findings, our critiques and our statements will appear idealistic and oftimes irrelevant. There will be tension with the world disorder and sometimes our scholarship will be unpopular.
In this regard I have been interested in observing how difficult it is for establishment voices to accept the possibility that they may be "against the stream," to use a Barthian phrase. Sheldon Wolin in the new journal *Democracy*, recently reminded his fellow liberal democrats political scientists that they have "to disengage from the many forms of dependency that make them accomplices in the legitimation of reactionary power." In a similar vein *The Wall Street Journal* three days ago (June 9, '82) reported the angst among Roman Catholic military officers in the U.S when their bishops say nuclear weapons can never be part of a just order.

People with a sense of being a minority understand such tensions as normative to Christian faithfulness. Peoplehood, history and ethnical insight make critique possible.

4. Mennonite studies ought to be seen as part of the missionary task of making all things new. The spirit of our studies up to this time has tended to undergird the urge for self preservation. Yet at the heart of Biblical faith and intrinsic to the meaning of church is a new reality God intends for all people.

George Mendenhall sees this in the Old Testament "imperium of God," a historical reality where the will of God was "binding beyond any social or territorial boundary." John Gager describes the early church as a "world in the making" that grew from "a single, overriding, internal faith, the radical sense of Christian community — open to all, insistent on absolute and exclusive loyalty and concerned for every aspect of the believer's life." Rod Sawatsky in his recent lecture entitled *Commitment and Critique* says the Christian's "only possible solution" to a pluralism threatened by anarchism and totalitarianism "is militant evangelistic persuasion of all in society to a morality of love and justice under God.'

Whatever we study — lifestyle or history, politics or theology, family life or education — ought to reflect this invitation to become part of God's movement and a critique of that which subverts, limits, or struggles against this movement. Such stance will not be narrowly denominational but part of the ecumenical conversation defining and redefining the Christian task. Again to quote Sawatsky: "Idolatry is the human problem, its identification the critical task, and its eradication the Kingdom."

5. If Mennonite studies are part of the missionary and prophetic task, then our studies must become much more interested in and oriented by the questions that are at the forefront of the human agenda.

It is nice to have cookbooks — I'm enough of an ethnic to prefer Mennonite cookery — but the real questions have to do with adequate food, properly distributed. If disintegration and hopelessness are an earmark of the contemporary situation, then Mennonite studies might demonstrate how to cope with adversity with dignity and meaning. Have we learned anything from a long tradition of educational activity that can
be translated in large urban situations where public systems (at least in the U.S.) are in serious disrepair if not actually disintegrating? After several generations of intensive involvement in overseas mission and service, Mennonites ought to at least be prepared to report what does not work, if we cannot claim any special insight into the process of development and modernization. And, of course, there must be something in our peace tradition applicable to the contemporary crisis. A Mennonite should at least confirm Richard Falk's prophetic statement: "The future prospects of the human species depend upon internalizing an essentially religious perspective, sufficient to transform secular outlooks that now dominate the destiny of the planet. . . . Values constitute the core of what the struggle is about, in reality, translating the great religious vision of what has been ethically presupposed for humanity into the actualities of political, economic and social arrangements."

When we take seriously the world's complaint, Mennonite studies will be contextual in the fullest sense and open to the most rigorous criticism of our presuppositions. Then Mennonite studies will surely be both a contribution to universal knowledge as well as being intimately linked to other groups with a similar understanding of God's cause in the world.

I had originally intended to list some representative topics for future study. I will leave this for you; suffice it to say I would hope that Mennonite studies reflect the most profound insight, the most fertile imagination, the deepest passion for human well-being and a fervent devotion to the God who is Alpha and Omega of all things.

Conclusion

Yahweh told the prophet Habbakuk: "The vision awaits its time." I believe there is a unique congruence between the interests and needs of the world with the insight and witness of the Mennonite tradition. Those of us who understand this tradition, ought to be at the forefront of suggesting how this experience may be relevant and realized as the "world in the making."

There are a few clues that these connections are being made. David Shank finds Cal Redekop's study of the impact of Paraguayan Mennonites on neighboring Indians relevant to Shank's own work on African independent churches in the modernization process. Another considerable success of Doris Janzen Longacre's "More With Less" writings demonstrate the larger world interest in the intrinsic qualities of Mennonite lifestyle. The interest of public agencies, like the Canadian International Development Agency, in Mennonite development activities is recognition that the quality of disinterested, non-aligned service is more than a Mennonite concern. Two weeks ago Atlee Beechy and Edgar Metzler joined Church of the Brethren and Quaker representatives in a Wash-
ington visitation. An exasperated official finally exclaimed: "Pacifists we can handle but now the pressure is coming from everywhere."

These vignettes, I submit, reflect Mennonite participation in the "world in the making." Mennonite scholars can make many more such linkages if we are prepared to apply our scholarship to "envision the Kingdom of God on earth." Frank Epp calls this the core witness. But this also reflects the core vision of all Christians and the most profound longing of all people. For as Jacques Ellul recently noted on the CBC: "The history of the human race, no matter how tragic, will ultimately lead to the Kingdom of God."\(^{10}\)

Notes

8. Ibid., p. 2.