

# Purity and Perseverance: Menno Simons' Understanding of Practical Holiness and Early Anabaptist Women

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To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God but they deny him by their actions. (Titus 1:15, 16)<sup>1</sup>

The contradictions of sixteenth-century Europe seem to be contained in embryonic form in these two verses from the letter to Titus. Using the first notion, "to the pure all things are pure," the hierarchical church had amassed a vast array of prestige, authority, wealth and worldliness. Any inherent impurities were to be absolved and sanctified by their use for Christian purposes. Many reform movements throughout Christian history had decried, however, the 'corrupt minds and consciences' witnessed at many levels of church authority. Finally, it became unarguable that in many Catholic quarters, as the more vociferous and successful reformers of the sixteenth century proclaimed, "They profess to know God but they deny him by their actions."

Menno Simons did not agree with the idea that all things are pure to the pure.<sup>2</sup> And he was very concerned that those who "profess to know God" must not "deny him by their actions."<sup>3</sup> That faith should be not only an interior reality but

also a clearly manifested outward sign of the Christian life became a central tenet of Menno's thought.

I believe that the high level of respect that other Christians in today's world feel for Mennonites is tied in with this original, fervent desire to avoid the perils of impure contamination with all that distracts from God. And I also believe that the manifested faith or practical holiness that was a corollary of this avoidance of impurity was particularly attractive to women. I will examine first Menno Simons' understanding of the pursuit of holiness, and then go on to probe the more complex notion of its particular attractiveness and potential for the faith life of women.

### **I. Menno Simons and Practical Holiness**

At about age forty, after twelve years as a Catholic priest, Menno Simons turned his back on a life of financial security and personal status and prestige and became an Anabaptist. This conversion was anything but sudden, since he had felt called to 'follow the scriptures more closely' for about seven years, since 1528.<sup>4</sup> "Menno's progress in the Gospel was slow"<sup>5</sup> but eventually he became more and more attracted to the Anabaptists who "based membership in the church upon a personal experience of salvation of which water baptism was merely the outward symbol."<sup>6</sup>

In Harold S. Bender's discussion on the significance of Menno Simons, he admits that Menno Simons was not the founder of the Mennonite church,<sup>7</sup> but that Menno's name nonetheless identifies the church:

The greatness of Menno Simons lies in three factors of influence, his character, his writings, and his message. But most of all it was the message of Menno Simons which made him a great leader in a great cause. He built no great system of theology, nor did he discover any great new or long-lost principle; he merely caught a clear vision of two fundamental Biblical ideals, the ideal of practical holiness, and the ideal of the high place of the church in the life of the believer and the cause of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

These two ideals, then, as central to Menno's message, account for his tremendous significance in Mennonite history. The second ideal could arguably be the same for Lutherans, Catholics and others in sixteenth-century Christianity. But the first, the ideal of practical holiness, marks a distinct (and, I will later argue, congenially feminine) departure from the sixteenth-century mores of his day. This is not to say that other religious leaders were indifferent to the behaviour of their followers, but rather that discrepancies in this area were less crucial—for example, in Catholicism's scheme of sacramental grace, Luther's scheme of grace through faith alone, or Calvin's understanding of salvation as a predestined gift from God. Again, this is not to say that Menno's emphasis on practical holiness implied the human ability to merit

salvation through works, but an outward lifestyle of proximate Christian purity was crucial as a manifestation of the inward conversion to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Concern for such a lifestyle had also preoccupied the mind of Erasmus of Rotterdam. Writing in his famous 1503 *Enchiridion*, he cautioned:

... some people... get a great deal of consolation out of attending divine services, Mass, vespers, and novenas. If they do this merely because they find pleasure in the ceremonies...or because it enhances their reputation, then they ought to examine their motives. They are in great danger of deceiving themselves.... Take... a case where your brother is in dire need of your help, and yet you go on mumbling your prayers, pretending not to notice his predicament. God will actually despise that kind of prayer.<sup>10</sup>

Yet ultimately Erasmus felt that “you may say mass with great fruit” if “you love nothing except in Christ” and you “make the difficulties and privations of your neighbour your very own.”<sup>11</sup> Menno, however, insisted that all things (especially Catholic rites) could *not* be pure to the pure:

But in regard to the false worship, *the frivolous* comfort one another saying, One may let his children be baptized, for the child is clean, the water is clean... We may also receive the Supper at the hands of these preachers, for although it takes place in the temple of idols, yet Christians have no idols anymore, nor do they eat it except as bread and wine which verily is pure to the pure, for as Paul says, To the pure all things are pure.<sup>12</sup> [emphasis added]

But to Menno the idea of remaining faithful as an individual Christian in spite of the corruption of one’s church is “frivolous” and ultimately dangerous. Since so many martyrs and saints of old made so many tremendous sacrifices in order to avoid even ceremonial observances of various “pagan” rituals, how, Menno goes on to ask, can all things be pure to the pure?

Menno’s “Foundation of Christian Doctrine” was written only a few years after his final break with the Catholic church (1539-40) and revised shortly before his death (1558). Embedded in this, Menno’s largest treatise, are several pages dealing with his rejection, or at least broad reinterpretation of, Paul’s notion that all things are pure to the pure. In a sense this rejection goes a long way toward explaining the martyrdom that a large number of Menno’s followers deemed necessary. And for the more specific purposes of our present discussion, many of the earliest expressions of Anabaptist practical holiness were born as counter-measures against forms of piety now seen as “frivolous” and even idolatrous:

Therefore, if anyone says, Why bother about the manipulations of the priests? Worship God as Naaman did!—it sounds to us like saying: Behold your good father will often be slanderously mocked, insulted, reviled, and much abused; do not let that affect you! Come along, just do not say anything. But of course in your heart, honour your father, etc. Say, friend, what sane and reasonable child could bear to see such great sorrow in his dear father and simply keep silence?... We must not thoughtlessly frequent houses of abomination where His great love and adorable name is miserably reviled and reproached, and where we can hear no truth nor learn

any piety, since it is nothing but hypocrisy which they teach, although garnished with the Word of the Lord, as may be evidently observed from the *practical results*.<sup>12</sup> [emphasis added]

The Christian converted to the true life of Christ, then, simply cannot overlook the evidence of the “practical results” of the lifestyles of the unconverted. Their lives, by and large, simply do not reflect Christ.

Those who followed Menno’s advice in this did not bring their infants for baptism to the Catholic parishes in their neighbourhoods; and they abstained from attending mass or at least from partaking in the Eucharist. Thus clearly disclosing themselves as Anabaptists, they were shipped off to local jails to experience torture, separation from their families and then a violent and painful death. So when Menno argues that all things are not pure to the pure, he is saying that therefore Anabaptists *must* separate themselves from Catholic “false worship” at all costs. And the costs were indeed great. Some tried to argue that they needed to remain a while longer as “captives in Babylon”.<sup>14</sup>

...in order that we may be able to support our wives and children and serve the poor, than that we should turn against the preachers wholly and thereby make all our possessions a prey.<sup>15</sup>

More than one Anabaptist (as in the case of other witch hunts down through history<sup>16</sup>) had been betrayed by those who envied their property, so this was an infinitely practical concern. And yet, in what seems like one of Menno’s rare displays of insensitivity to the plight of his followers, he refuses to approve of any delay in severing one’s ties with Catholicism, even though he himself did not actually leave the church (or even the priesthood!) for seven or eight years after “discovering the truth of the gospel of Christ.” This period of spiritual incubation, though seemingly indispensable to his own journey of faith, was apparently totally unnecessary and intolerable in those “weaklings” who knew the truth and yet remained “captives in Babylon.” Eschatological concern to spare his flock from “the coming retribution” may have been his motive in this.

What did Menno envision, then, in this life of practical holiness to which he called his followers? Menno’s insistence on evangelical believer’s baptism was, at bottom, an insistence on delaying the public proclamation of one’s acceptance of the covenant of Christ until one felt ready to take on consciously the awesome challenge of *living* as a Christian should. Concomitantly, his abhorrence for infant baptism boiled down to his fervent desire to caution Christians not to put their trust in the baptism without a suitable way of life. The false sense of security that allowed them to lead spiritually quite complacent and un strenuous lives was a threat to their ultimate salvation; and Menno’s vocation was to save them from this dangerous deception.

The stress on the importance of manifested faith appears too often in Menno’s writings to be documented. Here is a typical example:

The regenerate... lead a penitent and new life, for they are renewed in Christ and have received a new heart and spirit.... They put on Christ and manifest His spirit,

nature, and power in all their conduct... they do good to those who despitefully use them and pray for those who persecute them. Avarice, pride, unchastity, pomp they hate and oppose; all drunkenness, fornication, adultery, hatred, envy, backbiting, lying, cheating, fighting, quarrelling, robbing and plunder, blood and idolatry, in short, all impure, carnal works, and they resist the world with all its lusts. They meditate upon the law of the Lord by day and night; they rejoice at good and are grieved at evil. Evil they do not repay with evil, but with good. They do not seek merely their own good but that which is good for their neighbours both as to body and soul. They feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty. They entertain the needy, release prisoners, visit the sick, comfort the fainthearted, admonish the erring, are ready *after their Master's example* to give their lives for their brethren.<sup>17</sup> [emphasis added]

The notion that those who are reborn in Christ live a new and penitent life was hardly new and could only be considered radical in the sense of going back to the roots of Christianity's self-consciousness as an other-worldly, Cross-following group.

A number of studies have traced the connection between Anabaptist piety and several medieval influences, especially the Spiritual Franciscans, the *Devotio Moderna* and the writings of Erasmus (especially his pre-1525 writings). Kenneth R. Davis has commented upon and synthesized some of these earlier efforts in his 1974 book on *Anabaptism and Asceticism*. He goes so far as to conclude that:

Most of the issues and the predisposing climate of opinion, which gave rise to Anabaptism and provoked their separation from Magisterial Protestantism are, even in details, closely parallel to some aspects of the medieval ascetic tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Looking first at the connection with Franciscan spirituality, Davis cites the nineteenth-century work of Albrecht Ritschl who

... portrays Anabaptism as quite distinct from Luther, embodying and promoting instead that ascetic ideal of renunciation which was first [?] clearly enunciated by Francis, then taken up also by others, including the Waldensians and Groote's *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of some impressive parallels between Anabaptism and Franciscan spirituality,<sup>20</sup> Davis ultimately remains skeptical about the influence of the latter on Anabaptist origins because of the Franciscan proclivity for favouring the institution of the church and pope<sup>21</sup> (they have not survived to our own day by accident) although these, too, were not consistent Franciscan approaches.

The business of ascribing influences is a tricky one, but that similarities exist between Anabaptist ideals and those of various lay poverty movements starting in at least the twelfth century is not only unarguable but also not surprising given the typical human attraction/repulsion for the challenging pursuit of excellence in any worthwhile field of endeavour. The field of the Christian pursuit of holiness has hardly been exempt from this pattern as Christians in every century struggle to embrace the essentials of Christian

living while trying to avoid various extremes.

In tracing these kinds of tendencies as they influenced the origins of Anabaptism, K.R. Davis sees more in common between them and the *Devotio Moderna* than with Franciscan spirituality. And he sees the greatest link to be with the influence of early Erasmian ideals. George H. Williams is among the scholars who agree on this point:

Not only in his stress upon the New Testament and ancient Christian sources and in his casualness about the Nicene-Lateran formulations of the doctrines of the Trinity, but also in other doctrines and attitudes, Erasmus would be presently appealed to by diverse leaders of the Radical Reformation. This was true of his opposition to the monastic vow and his reconception of marriage...his understanding of both Baptism and Communion... his (qualified) pacifism, and his insistence on the practical freedom of the will.<sup>22</sup>

The whole shift away from dogmas and ceremonials and towards essentials, of which Menno Simons tirelessly wrote, found many echoes in Erasmus' writings:

You will not be damned if you do not know whether the spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son has one or two beginnings, but you will not escape damnation if you do not cultivate the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, mercy, faith, modesty, continence, and chastity....<sup>23</sup>

Not only did the Anabaptists reverberate with such Erasmian foci but Erasmus himself was hardly among the almost universal (within European Christianity) forces aligned against them:

Erasmus was not only esteemed by the Anabaptists but, as is evident from his writings, he was also fairly well informed about them. Though requested by Johann Cochlaeus, in January 1528, to write against them, he was one of the few reforming leaders who never did.<sup>24</sup>

However, Erasmus remained to his dying day as a "captive in Babylon," whereas Menno Simons and other Anabaptist leaders were convinced that the majority of Catholic practices (and a substantial portion of Lutheran and others) were "abominations" that could not be tolerated in the Christian life. Erasmus thought that individual purity could be sought privately within the confines of an imperfect church: "there will always be things which the faithful must endure." Realizing that holiness of life cannot be legislated but only encouraged, Erasmus had always preferred the sharp tip of his pen to any form of the sword of coercion. Although he admitted to having "always disliked those mean and money-grabbing mass-priests,"<sup>25</sup> he sees no need to abolish the mass. Rather, his ongoing focus was on individual reform of lifestyle and worship so that the two might be more closely conformed.

In contrast, for Menno, to try to worship God at the masses of those "mean and money-grabbing mass-priests" was to court damnation rather than being among the "things which the pious must endure." The true disciples of Christ had no choice but to live according to the true precepts of the gospel, regardless

of the persecution that ensued. Integrity was more important than safety, as Christ had clearly indicated in accepting the Cross. And the covenant with him who had invited others to follow this path, was not to be entered lightly or unconsciously or while asleep or by the fainthearted.

Since coercion had no place in the human-divine drama called salvation, it was hardly justifiable in the more crucial aspects of the life of faith. Thus Menno notes that: "... the holy apostles of God have baptized none but those only who desired to be baptized..."<sup>26</sup> The necessity of desire and acceptance as prerequisites for Christian baptism held great attraction for all who longed to deepen their lived covenant with God.

The experience of medieval European women, in particular, was largely an experience of coercion from cradle to grave.<sup>27</sup> That women, then, were attracted to a type a Christianity that emphasized personal assent was hardly surprising. In turning to examine more closely woman's place in early Anabaptism, we will further probe the appeal of purity and practical holiness that were such distinguishing marks in Menno's theology.

## II. Menno Simons and the Experience of Medieval Women

The fifteenth-century manuscript illustration of a jealous husband beating his wife is not meant to elicit an emotional (and therefore unacademic) response in the reader, but certain observations of its details might help speed up our analysis of the necessary *context* for the examination of the question at hand.

Note, for instance, that the surroundings and dress of the main characters suggests at least a middle class if not upper class setting. And note also that the observers at the doorway are merely passive (though perhaps compassionate) witnesses; and there is no suggestion of their moving towards the rescue of the victim. Their unhidden presence would also add to the wife's humiliation. The fact that the wife's shoes (no doubt flimsy and ornamental) have already flown off, further reinforces the artist's portrayal of the great unlikelihood of her escape. The beautiful long hair of the woman, normally veiled or tied up away from public view and reserved for her husband's aesthetic sensibilities, is used instead by him to anchor the woman in place for the beating, and to increase its brutality and pain. And finally (though many other details invite comment) we note that the woman's face is strikingly devoid of the emotion of anger. We see perhaps terror, resignation, humiliation and the anguished plea for mercy, but not, apparently, anger.

Most studies of the place of woman in medieval society would corroborate this image of a wife who, though she is clearly upset and perhaps even terrorized by her husband's behaviour, is not really angry at him because this was what society expected of him. Many medieval writers mention the necessity and duty of the husband to discipline his wife. The "Rules of



Jealous husband beating wife. From a 15th-century manuscript.  
Credit: *Not in God's Image*, ed. O'Faolain & Martines, p. 139.

Marriage” compiled by Friar Cherubino of Siena between 1450 and 1481 are an example:

When you see your wife commit an offence, don't rush at her with insults and violent blows: rather...sweetly teach her not to do it again... But if your wife is of a servile disposition... so that pleasant words have no effect, scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if this still doesn't work... take up a stick and beat her soundly, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body. But notice, I say, that you shouldn't beat her just because she doesn't get things ready exactly as you would like them. . . You should beat her, I say, only when she commits a serious wrong: for example, if she blasphemes



against God or a saint, if she mutters the devil's name, if she likes being at the window and lends a ready ear to dishonest young men, or if she has taken to bad habits or bad company... Then readily beat her, not in rage but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beatings will redound to your merit and her good.<sup>18</sup>

An excerpt from a study of the customs of thirteenth-century France reveals a similar perspective.

In a number of cases men may be excused for the injuries they inflict on their wives, nor should the law intervene. Provided he neither kills nor maims her, it is legal for a man to beat his wife when she wrongs him—for instance, when she is about to surrender her body to another man, when she contradicts or abuses him, or when she refuses, like a decent woman, to obey his reasonable commands. In all these and similar cases, it is the husband's office to be his wife's chastiser.<sup>29</sup>

Thus a picture emerges of medieval woman as a creature totally at the mercy of the men in her life.<sup>30</sup> And since celibacy had been compulsory for clergy in western Christendom since the ninth century, we are not surprised to find that medieval theological writing does not exactly cherish the image of woman as co-heir of Christ's grace.

It would be misleading to suggest prematurely that the more enlightened Anabaptists had emerged easily out of this unfortunate perspective. Balthasar Hubmaier, for example (burned at the stake 1528), saw Adam as a type of the soul and Eve as a type of the flesh:

The reason why the fall of the soul is partly reparable, however, and not fatal, even here on earth, but the fall of the flesh is to a certain extent irreparable and deadly, is that Adam, as a type of the soul (as is Eve, of the flesh), would have preferred not to eat of the forbidden tree. He was also not deceived by the serpent, but Eve was (1 Timothy 2:14). Adam knew very well that the words of the serpent were contrary to the words of God. Yet he willed to eat the fruit against his own conscience, so as not to vex or anger his rib, his flesh, Eve. He would have preferred not to do it. But when he was more obedient to his Eve than to God, he lost his knowledge of good and evil, so that he could not wish nor choose anything good....<sup>31</sup>

Hubmaier is not to be blamed for what amounts to a typical medieval exegesis of the Fall. In fact, Eve and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were the two main female archetypes of medieval Europe. If one could not be compared to the latter, then she was compared to the former.

Modern Mennonite scholars are among those who have reinterpreted the theology of the Fall, even apart from its detrimental effects on the image of women:

... the doctrine of the Fall... however profound, has had the effect of giving permanent place to diminished expectations... this is not least so because it has been given a place at the dogmatic table alongside the equally perennial doctrine of redemption, which functions like a divinely placed fig leaf over the sin and sinning we have given permanent place to with the Fall. What is needed instead is a struggle with failure out of a disposition not of cynicism but of grief, of deep disappointment—*theology as lament*. "How could we have...?!" After Christ, sin and failure

should constitute not the expected but, in some sense, always the unexpected, a shocking surprise.<sup>32</sup>

By the sixteenth century, women had become very accustomed to “diminished expectations.” The effect of the Fall was still largely understood to be sexual lust and women continued to be held mainly responsible because they supposedly used their beauty and feminine charms to seduce innocent men who otherwise would be free from this corrupting sin (as Hubmaier affirms). This basic fifteenth-century perspective remained largely unquestioned in popular literature until Erasmus (especially after becoming acquainted in England with the educated daughters of Thomas More) began to intersperse his writings with what we would today call “feminist remarks.”<sup>33</sup>

The question of the extent to which such writings influenced Menno Simons remains open (although we know that he read and admired Erasmus), but the fact is that Menno himself was remarkably respectful and compassionate towards the experience of women within the context of his times and heritage. Here are a few examples:

... the women ... were no less the seed of Abraham and subjects to the covenant of God... than were the circumcised men...<sup>34</sup>

...how wickedly you poor ignorant people live... to violate women and girls is called gallantry and love...<sup>35</sup>

...I find that in many places throughout the world, numbers of vain and abandoned characters, some of them married, some not... of all classes... live in all manner of excess, vanity, drunkenness, and impurity, according to their shameful, improper lusts and devilish desires. In all manner of fornication and adultery they seduce and disgrace one girl after the other, notwithstanding that they are baptized. And when they by their lack of restraint have done all this, have brought such shame and dishonour upon simple and unsuspecting souls who are also born of Adam, and who are perhaps deceived by false promises and gifts . . . these same persons carry the children who are thus illegitimately born of such seducers, such immoral rascals and abandoned women, to the baptism, that they may be called Christians...<sup>36</sup>

In this last passage the men are “seducers” and “immoral rascals” while the women are “abandoned” and “perhaps deceived by false promises and gifts.” This turns upside down the pervasive notion of women as evil temptresses who dare to seduce men who are made in God’s own image.

Although there are many passages in Menno’s writings that admonish women (and men!) to dress plainly and live a subdued and humble life, he is far from blaming women by and large for men’s out-of-control passions. At the same time he is not so naive as not to acknowledge that women can cultivate this behaviour in men:

And even as we find many wicked men who shamefully wrong poor, simple hearts, so on the other hand we find many shameless women and girls who are often the first cause that such disgrace is sought and sometimes practised on them. *And*

*although many are not guilty of the deed, nevertheless they are not guiltless in that they allow such intimacy with other men and companions, with bold face singing, dancing, drinking, kissing, flirting, primping and fixing up, and the like vanity and abominations whereby with some they kindle the fire of base passions...*<sup>37</sup> [emphasis added]

So Menno does not place women on a pedestal of total superhuman innocence, but he is unusually sensitive (for his time) to the plight of so many victimized women:

They [the men] all boast... that they are baptized in the name of Christ. And yet they are not ashamed to turn their poor, weak sisters, who are included with them in the same faith, baptism, holy Supper, and worship, into poor, disgraced, and degraded strumpets against all Scripture and Christian love; even though God's own mouth... commands them [Ex 22:16] that if they be deflowered, then they should take them to wife and never forsake them. If they would ponder these things, many a girl would be spared shame whereas now many an honest man's child is cruelly wronged, and many a girl deprived of her honour and virtue.... O you violators of feminine chastity, reflect upon these things and learn wisdom.<sup>38</sup>

Menno's overall belief that women "were no less the seed of Abraham and subjects to the covenant of God" is found in many other places in his writings as well.

Unlike the Muensterites and the other "corrupt sects" of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, Menno also repeatedly denounces the practice of polygamy,<sup>40</sup> a practice that demeaned woman, reducing her central role to that of an incubator for "man's seed." As Gary Waite explains:

Polygamy in Muenster was constructed upon the traditional Christ-husband-wife hierarchy with the husband ruling over his wife as Christ ruled over the Church. The husband was granted the "glorious freedom" to take more than one wife so as not to waste his seed, especially if his first wife was pregnant or barren. The wife was to submit completely to her husband "without any grumbling." Male Muensterite leaders therefore had hoped that polygamy would help control Muensterite women who vastly outnumbered them.<sup>41</sup>

Polygamy was in fact so demeaning to women that it remains a mark of Menno's ultimate effectiveness that women remained interested in Anabaptism in spite of this practice among some who bore the same name.

In writing about the colourful leader of the Davidians, David Joris, Waite gives us some further clues to the position that women held at this time. Ultimately infamous in part because of his various sexual escapades (in spite of being officially not a proponent of polygamy), Joris spoke of the necessity of removing lust from the sphere of marital relations:

While Joris agreed with... [the]... view that sexual relations were strictly for procreation (a commonplace in Catholic thought), he went one step further. Not only was sleeping with menstruating or pregnant wives disallowed, but in the act of procreation both parties were to remove any trace of lust or sexual desire from their relationship. *Only in this way could children be conceived without original*

*sin*—a condition necessary if they were to become part of the future Kingdom... What was important to Joris was that marriage partners remove lust and its by-product shame from their relationships.<sup>42</sup> [emphasis added]

If Waite is correct in this interpretation of Joris, the influence of Augustinian thought is evident. And Joris is among those purifiers of human sexual relations who neglects to acknowledge the simple technical fact that coitus cannot occur in the absence of male sexual desire. It can, however, happen to women even if they are unconscious or recently deceased. The ideal, then, of Joris' marital theology and of Muensterite-type polygamy, was far from a sexual free-for-all. The men were dutifully, and without indulging any feelings of desire or lust, to spread their good Christian seed as liberally as possible. And women were to accept this seed without the grumbling that might indicate a measure of displeasure. Pleasure, as the men explained to the women, was not after all a factor in God's purposes for man and woman.

On the one hand, theological writing should avoid *unnecessary* forays into risky areas such as this. On the other hand, it is probably hopelessly naive to approach the subject of early Anabaptist women without taking these important contextual realities into account.<sup>43</sup> My own research for this article on the subject of early Anabaptist women revealed a consistent trend: women's lives, women's ideas and women's writings only became important after they had become martyrs for the faith. The overwhelming amount of scholarship on these women focuses on their important role as martyrs, and thus on proving them equal to men in the depth of their faith commitment.

There has been a great deal of commentary on this phenomenon of woman's equality to man in martyrdom and I will therefore not undertake a close scrutiny of specific Anabaptist women as martyrs. To some it has come as a surprise that women have proven equally brave in the face of torture and murder to their male counterparts. Of greater interest to our present discussion, though, is the content of women's theological views from this time. This area alone is very large and I will deal with Anneken Jans, who has been called the first female Anabaptist theologian,<sup>44</sup> as representative. Her perspective is quite typical though more elaborate than the writings of other women in the *Martyrs Mirror*. The main work for which she is remembered is a letter to her son Isaiah written while she was in prison awaiting death. Here is part of this letter:

Therefore, my child, do not regard the great number, nor walk in their ways. Remove thy foot far from their paths, for they go to hell, as sheep unto death... Be a pious Israelite, trample underfoot all unrighteousness, the world and all that is in it, and love only that which is above.... sanctify your whole conduct in the fear of your God. ... Honor the Lord in the works of your hands... Love your neighbour. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything twofold; for there are always some who lack.... Whatever the Lord grants you from the sweat of your face, above what you need, communicate to those of whom you know that they love the Lord... and suffer nothing to remain in your possession until the morrow... let your life be conformed to the Gospel....<sup>45</sup>

We see in Anneken Jans' ideas a great affinity with Menno Simon's understanding of practical holiness (as well as with the Franciscan connection and the centrality of the last judgment scene of Mt 25). We see also the "advantage," to history at least, of women's martyrdom. Women were not allowed to teach, as Paul made clear, but women have always taught their children. Jans' letter to her son became public and has spanned the centuries and the continents only, it seems, because of her subsequent martyrdom.

In looking at the story of David Joris, however, another side of the Anneken Jans story is revealed. It seems that in 1536, three years prior to her martyrdom, Jans had accepted a pursued and fleeing Joris as her house guest. While offering him refuge, these two passionately faithful people naturally communicated a great deal about their faith perspectives:

[Here] Joris received new understanding from the Scriptures and "divine dreams"... the first visions that Joris experienced....it is possible that Anneken, who scholars assume to be the inspiration for the... visions, was the catalyst for his aspirations to prophetic status. Joris and his female supporter fell in love here, although the relationship appeared from all accounts to have been of a platonic nature.... they prayed together whenever tempted by the flesh. The hostess seemed taken by Joris' spirituality and she knew not "how to praise God enough about this man's gifts."... That Joris' prophetic ecstasy seems to have increased during his time with the woman is an intriguing aspect of this relationship....<sup>46</sup>

Van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror*, like other respectable hagiographical sources before and since, does not deal with this type of information. But the modern pursuit of a larger human picture dares not exclude such pains and struggles. Such human vulnerability and the courageous struggle to keep safe from its perils deserves, I believe, a place in the historical study of religious thought. The tyranny of fifth-century misogyny, that would typically interpret this story as the evil temptress trying to seduce the man of God, must come to an end. The simple reality is that human beings often care deeply about other human beings whose ultimate concerns seem to resonate with their own. The handling of such "deep caring" is often difficult and complex, but a disservice is done when it is simply written off as evil and nothing more. In this case the "evil temptress" went on to an early death in the form of martyrdom whereas "the man of God" died naturally after a long life as a wealthy Swiss aristocrat of dubious morals.

There is in fact considerable evidence, especially in the letters of the *Martyrs Mirror*, that when the depth of faith commitment was shared, especially by a husband and wife, their relationship rose to new levels of tenderness and respect, levels that seem incredible given the context we have previously discussed of the place of women in medieval society. As Jenifer Hiatt Umble suggests, "[T]hese letters indicate that Anabaptist husbands considered their wives to be spiritual companions...."<sup>47</sup> Acknowledging that, generally, Anabaptist men and women do not appear to have *directly* challenged the patriarchal organization of church and family in the sixteenth century, Umble notes nonetheless the many "words of respect, love, and grief in the letters of

Anabaptist men [which] reveal strong emotional attachment between many spouses."<sup>48</sup>

So we see that within the context of sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrdom, women had a fairly rare opportunity both to be teachers of the faith and (especially in the case of deeply committed Anabaptist husbands) to enjoy marital relationships of greater equality, integrity and tenderness (a marked departure from the woman in our picture). However, it would be overly optimistic to deduce from this that women were far better off in the Anabaptist movement. As Claus-Peter Clasen claims: "Revolutionary as Anabaptism was in some respects, the sect showed no inclination to grant women a greater role than they customarily had in sixteenth-century society."<sup>49</sup> And furthermore, as Clasen indicates, there is statistical evidence that women were generally less enamoured of Anabaptism than men:

During the entire period from 1525 to 1618... 68.4 percent of the Anabaptists were men, and 31.6 percent were women. Of course, the proportion was not constant... But on the whole men constituted more than 65 percent and women less than 35 percent.<sup>50</sup>

Clasen goes on to speculate as to the reasons for this disproportion. Rumours of promiscuity and sex orgies deterred some.<sup>51</sup> His speculations include, but perhaps do not highlight enough, the greater bond with and responsibility for children that women have historically lived out:

A man might be willing to sacrifice everything to his salvation—his family, home, and property. When one Anabaptist was reminded of the sorrow he had caused his wife and child, he coldly replied, "Nothing is as dear to me as my own salvation." A man might agree that for ideological reasons it was preferable to take children away from their parents at the age of two or three, as the Hutterites did. But it was undoubtedly harder for a woman to part with her children, even for the sake of saving her soul. Of course this factor should not be exaggerated. Many women did not hesitate to make great sacrifices for their belief.<sup>52</sup>

Clasen's conclusion here leaves something to be desired. Could it be that some women who refrained from openly joining the Anabaptists did so in order to remain available (i.e., alive) to feed, house, and protect children too young to survive on their own? And perhaps even if the children's physical survival was assured, some mothers no doubt accepted the personal sacrifice of compromise in the hopes of remaining influential in launching the next generation to a life of greater faith integrity. Such women's names have not come down to us as heroes of the faith. And perhaps that anonymity is part of their sacrifice.

A realistic view of the generally subordinate position of women in sixteenth-century society reinforces the notion of the necessity of silence in the face of living with things and people with which one often did not agree. Girls were taught everywhere from a very early age that the more they kept their opinions to themselves, the better life would be. With husbands given carte blanche by many authorities<sup>53</sup> to beat their wives so long as they refrained from maiming or killing, is it any wonder that women had grown accustomed to putting up with

much that is "impure"? What Clasen and other historians, social and otherwise, may have failed to realize is that historical statistics hide rather than reveal those heroes of any movement whose greatest sacrifice has been to remain anonymous in their struggles and therefore relatively alone, except for the succour which God has always offered to such people.

Persevering in purity of heart, such women could praise an understanding of faith as *conversio morem*, or manifested faith, as Menno expressed it, or faith active through love as Luther would have it, a *metanoia* that expressed itself in a life of greater *caritas*. Perhaps, in a sense, Hubmaier's classifying of woman as flesh (and man as soul) was not without its potential for insight. In woman's traditional function of the nurturing of the flesh, she has generally borne more responsibility towards God's earthly creation in seeking her salvation, than the men who could more readily rely on the elaborate systems of sacramental grace they had constructed.

### Conclusion: Women and Practical Holiness

While men have gone off to fight wars, build bridges, write books or pursue other significant goals, women have often remained at home doing things like eyeing the tomatoes that have begun ripening in the garden in hopes of stretching the food budget. Or they have noticed that the neighbour child's coat is threadbare and they have mended, cleaned and altered something of their own to offer her. Or they have eased the load of the old and sick with a casserole or a snow shovel that keeps on going until their walk is cleared too.

The wars and the books and the bridges are recorded in history's annals. The gardens, mended coats and shovelled snow are not. To the limited extent that it is safe to generalize, we can therefore say that women have understood practical holiness better than men. They have understood the distinction between the *ritual purity* that most religions have embodied as a result of men's desires to feel secure about their status, and the *purity of heart* that Jesus recommended in its place (Mt 15:1-20; Mk 7:1-23).

All the sixteenth-century reformers were anxious to become disentangled to greater or lesser extents from Catholic ritual purity. And all of them realized that the greatest danger of such excessive rituals was that sacramentalism had come to substitute for the saving gospel of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Luther by and large substituted *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* for what he considered to be empty Catholic sacraments and indulgences. Menno Simons went further in a sense and suggested that the whole lived reality of human existence was the only "sacrifice" suitable to offer to God. And that whenever people put their trust in any form of ritual purity instead, they were not only deluded but often complacently neglecting the real vocation of a Christian disciple, a vocation in which all of life must reflect our adherence to those crucial first two commandments.

Thus, with an understanding of all of life as needing to be consecrated to God's purposes, woman's traditional concern for the practical side of life assumed a place of new importance. It was not enough to be baptized, or to go to confession and then communion and then go home and beat your wife because she had contradicted you or put too much salt in the soup. A focus such as Menno's, first of all, spared many women from assault since a good Anabaptist husband (in spite of Hubmaier's words) did his best to *live out* the teachings of the gentle and compassionate Christ. Secondly, such a focus redefined the ordinary works of mercy that had long comprised so many women's everyday preoccupations.

The centripetal force of Menno's enlightened views caused these traditionally female concerns for practical holiness to be fairly catapulted from the periphery of Christian existence to its centre, a centre in which the true disciple of Christ persevered in her efforts to *live* a life of discipleship, not just talk or write about it.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This and all subsequent scripture quotations taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup>*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561* [hereafter CW] tr. Leonard Verduin, ed. J.C. Wenger, Biography by Harold S. Benger (Kitchener, ON: Herald Ptrdd, 1984), pp. 182-89. These pages will be examined more closely as our discussion develops.

<sup>3</sup>Menno, of course, went so far as banning or excommunicating those whose actions or lifestyles did not clearly manifest their allegiance to Christ. See, e.g., "A Kind Admonition of Church Discipline, 1541," CW, pp. 407-18, and "A Clear Account of Excommunication, 1550," CW, pp. 455-85.

<sup>4</sup>Harold S. Bender, "A Brief Biography of Menno Simons," in CW, p.6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.8.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.28.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.29.

<sup>9</sup>In the twentieth century, this ongoing emphasis on living out a manifested faith has led to the institution of the Mennonite Central Committee and the characteristic Mennonite affinity for more-with-less. These not insignificant developments, though not pertinent to our historical study, should be kept in mind as among the abundant "fruits" of this sixteenth-century seminal concern for practical holiness. See *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* by R.S. Kreider and R.W. Goosen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Desiderius Erasmus, *Enchiridion Militis Christiani (Handbook of the Militant Christian)*, tr. John P. Dolan (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1962), pp. 90-91.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>12</sup>CW, "Foundations of Christian Doctrine," p. 182.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>16</sup>Including, for instance, the detaining this century of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia during World War II and the subsequent confiscation of their property by subsequently unknown agents.

<sup>17</sup>CW, "The New Birth," p. 93.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth R. Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1974), p. 296.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 233. I have interjected a question mark because of the many twelfth-century poverty movements in Christian Europe. The Waldensians, e.g., were a twelfth-century group and therefore predated Francis.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 237-43.

<sup>22</sup>George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 10. On this latter point, Williams elaborates that "His [Erasmus'] conviction about man's capacity to use his own resources and specifically his free will to work out his own salvation was expounded in his first explicit attack on the predestinarianism of the Reformation in 1524, *Diatribes de libero arbitrio...*" (p. 11).

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 10, quoting Erasmus, *Epistolae*, ed. P.S. Allen, V; 173-192, No. 1334, 176ff.

<sup>24</sup>Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism*, p. 277.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted from Erasmus' 1527 letter to Martin Bucer [Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi II, 231-2, 11th Nov. 1527, Quoted in *The Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 424-6.] In this letter Erasmus explains why he preferred to remain Catholic in spite of the Catholic church's many flaws.

<sup>26</sup>CW, "Christian Baptism," p. 275.

<sup>27</sup>See, e.g., *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* by Frances and Joseph Gies (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1987), and *Not In God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*, eds. Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines (N.Y.: Harper Colophon, 1973).

<sup>28</sup>Quoted in O'Faolain & Martines, *Not In God's Image*, p. 177. The reader may wish to consult again the illustration to observe the "charity and concern" on the husband's face.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 175. This attitude remains customary in many cultures today. The study of various religious attitudes towards wife-beating (especially the implicit ones since the explicit ones are very often "politically correct") is fascinating but largely incomplete.

<sup>30</sup>Before the husband, the father was in charge, and even a younger brother had much authority over his sister (as I was able to personally observe in a 1971 trip to Rome).

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in O'Faolain & Martines, *Not In God's Image*, p. 202, from Hubmaier "On Free Will". The plain fact of Genesis 3:6 that Adam "was with her" at the time of her serpent's proposal (according to all modern translations) has been noted by a number of modern writers, and treated with indifference by all those who insist on a more traditional exegesis of the Fall.

<sup>32</sup>Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Christian Counterculture: Ecclesia and Establishment" in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Apr. 1989, vol. 63, p. 200.

<sup>33</sup>E.g., his colloquy on the abbot and the learned woman, and such comments are found in many places in his writings.

<sup>34</sup>CW, "Foundations of Christian Doctrine," p. 132.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>36</sup>CW, "True Christian Baptism," p. 251.

<sup>37</sup>CW, "True Christian Faith," pp. 380-81.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>39</sup>CW, "Foundations of Christian Doctrine," p. 132.

<sup>40</sup>See the many references indexed under "polygamy" in CW.

<sup>41</sup>Gary K. Waite, *David Joris and Dutch Anabaptism 1524-1543* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1990), p. 104.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105. This notion is explored in recent Canadian literature by Margaret Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*.

<sup>43</sup>In fact, women's history in general needs to read persistently between the lines of the heritage of male history that has largely been indifferent to "her story." See, e.g., *Revisioning the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology*, ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). Engel's chapter (3) on "Historical Theology and Violence Against Women" can easily seem annoyingly evasive and overly critical of other work done in this area. However, Engel is correct in thereby suggesting the difficulty of "unearthing" a history which was either deliberately hidden or (more likely) ignored as unimportant.

<sup>44</sup>Jennifer Hiatt Umble's article on "Women and Choice: An Examination of the *Martyr's Mirror*" (MQR vol. 64, Apr. 1990 pp. 135-45) refers (p. 140) to her as such and cites a 1954 article by A. Orley Swartzentruber (MQR, vol. 28, Apr. 1954, pp. 128-42) as among the earlier modern writers to recognize Jans in this way.

<sup>45</sup>*Martyrs Mirror* "Anna of Rotterdam, put to death... 1539," p. 454.

<sup>46</sup>Waite, *David Joris*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>47</sup>Umble, "Spiritual Companions: Women as Wives in the *Martyrs Mirror*," in *Mennonite Life*, Sept. 1990, p. 32.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup>Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History 1525-1618* (London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972), p. 207.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>53</sup>In Hubmaier's catechism (such books usually reflect a popular ethos) the discussion on good works includes this glimpse of women's lives at this time:

Leon: Can you, of yourself, do good works?

Hans: God alone is good and he works in us the good willing and working (Matt. 19:17, Philip. 2:13).

Leon: If man can do no good, why does God damn him?

Hans: He damns him not for doing but for not doing, as a teacher strikes his pupils not for learning but for not learning. *Also a husband strikes his wife not for doing but for not doing*. Thus God damns man not for his works, but rather because he has neglected them, or has not done them according to his will and pleasure. [emphasis added]

From Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms*, pp. 165-6.

<sup>54</sup>CW, p. 259, esp. J.C. Wenger's footnote #21.