

# Models of the Mennonite Religious Imagination in Rudy Wiebe's "Mennonite" Novels

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This study was prompted by a strong sense of the discontinuity that occurs between the possibilities for social/personal transformation inherent in Mennonite thought (for example, the ethic of radical discipleship) and our community's actual living out of these possibilities. This discontinuity is summarized well by sociologist Leo Driedger, who states, "Although an active concern for (social) issues would seem to be a natural consequence of (Mennonites') radical historical peace position, often it is not."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that there is much ambivalence among Mennonites on minority rights, even though they have suffered greatly as a minority, and that attitudes on war and capital punishment vary, even though non-violence is a major tenet of Anabaptism. All this is especially ironic for a group that was founded on the revolutionary vision of transforming society into a classless "fraternity" based on equality and self-giving love.<sup>2</sup> How can we account for the difference between what we have stood

for historically and continue to say we believe and the actual attitudes and actions of the community itself?

I believe the problem lies not so much in our specific ethical codes, theological doctrines or confessions of faith as in what I call our religious imagination, that is, the overall picture of God, the world and self that forms our interpretive framework, our worldview.<sup>3</sup> Driedger makes the same point when he says that differences in social ethics among Mennonites are based not just in theology but “more broadly in differential views of God and the world.”<sup>4</sup> The religious imagination, then, is that which “composes the real,”<sup>5</sup> the faculty that integrates our images/concepts of God and the world into a meaningful whole by which we orient ourself and from which emerge our ethical values and vision of the good life.<sup>6</sup>

To get a focus on the Mennonite religious imagination, I turn to contemporary Mennonite literature. I have chosen the artist rather than the theologian or ethicist primarily because I found the latter more inclined to debate intricacies of doctrine or social ethics (i.e. cognitive beliefs), while the artist depicts a more integrated view of the whole of Mennonite life. Indeed, Mennonite poet Keith Ratzlaff says the poet’s responsibility is to “literally search for a stance to life.”<sup>7</sup> Secondly, I have found Mennonite fiction and poetry to have a more iconoclastic, critical nature than most theological work. Literary artists simply seem more likely to challenge fundamental assumptions of the Mennonite worldview. This is, in fact, the very function of art, if we accept literary critic Hildi Froese Tiessen’s assertion that art should “make the mundane seem strange (and) interfere with our habitual, automatic way of seeing in order to force us to see with fresh eyes.”<sup>8</sup>

I have chosen to concentrate specifically on Rudy Wiebe here because of all the contemporary Mennonite artists he deals most explicitly with “religious” — that is, spiritual or ethical — issues.<sup>9</sup> He is a writer profoundly aware of the moral nature of art: “The whole purpose of art, of poetry, of story-telling, is to make us better,” he has said.<sup>10</sup> For these reasons, Wiebe has been described by Harry Loewen as a prophet who has become the conscience of his society through his art.<sup>11</sup>

The first aim of this article is to analyze and critique the Mennonite religious imagination. My primary source material for this is derived from Wiebe’s novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and the “short story” “The Vietnam Call of Samuel Reimer” from his Mennonite epic novel *The Blue Mountains of China*. In these writings, Wiebe sketches two different Mennonite milieus, what I call the authoritarian sect and the apathetic middle-class, respectively.<sup>12</sup> My contention is that both of these socio-cultural settings are characterized by an absolutizing, dualistic religious imagination that results in devastating social, spiritual and ethical problems. In fact, this imagination produces what I have named idols in each community, if we understand idols to be “misplaced commitments and loyalties”<sup>13</sup> that are destructive of human life and potential. These idols take the place of the real God in each community, the God that challenges and empowers

challenges and empowers us to build the realm of God here on earth.

The second aim of this article is to sketch a reconstruction of the Mennonite religious imagination. In Wiebe's latest "Mennonite" novel, *My Lovely Enemy*, I believe we see glimmers of an imagination that is not absolutistic or dualistic but one that is "parabolic" and holistic, terms that will be elaborated upon in that section.

### The Absolutizing, Dualistic Imagination

The absolutizing imagination is what Jesuit psychologist William Lynch calls "humanity's innate drive to make an absolute out of everything in its world,"<sup>14</sup> an impulse born of the "inability to endure not knowing."<sup>15</sup> This imagination needs absolute clarity and certainty in everything and thus seeks to clearly define the world in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. The lines of battle must be clearly drawn, and everything in the world must fall into one camp or the other. Therefore, everything complicated must desperately be reduced to the simple, for the absolutizing imagination expects and demands a "single, simple way of thinking and feeling in any human situation."<sup>16</sup> This attitude is illustrated rather humorously in *My Lovely Enemy* when the staunch Mennonite pastor, in explaining how he knows the difference between right and wrong, says, "It's like a white shirt... is it clean or not? If you have to ask, it's dirty" (123).

The absolutizing imagination combined with a theistic worldview can be especially dangerous, for our absolutes reflect even more of an air of unchangeability when they are seen as God's commands. The epistemological presupposition underlying theistic absolutism is that God and God's will are objects "out there" (i.e. ahistorical, supernatural principles outside of human experience) that can be absolutely known by humans because they have been revealed once and for all, either through the Bible, the life of Christ, tradition, natural law, etc. For most Mennonites, the Bible—especially the words and actions of Christ—is regarded as possessing absolute authority.<sup>17</sup> In addition, many Mennonites also assume that the time-tested teachings of the church "fathers" correctly interpret the Christian message, as illustrated by Deacon Block's statement in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* that the great matters of moral and spiritual discipline have been laid down once and for all in the Bible and our fathers have told us how we should act according to them. They cannot change" (202).

When referring to the dualistic imagination, I am focussing on the dualism that has most influenced the Mennonite worldview: the church/world dualism.<sup>18</sup> The historic roots of this view run almost to the beginning of Anabaptism. Yet many scholars believe separation from the world was not the original intention of the Anabaptist movement, which was instead founded on a vision of a transformed society in which all would live within the realm of God.<sup>19</sup> But due to intense persecution, societal rejection, mass migration and geographic isola-

tion, Mennonites soon became the "Stillen im Lande," and their identity as a faithful remnant of God living in strict nonconformity with and separation from the world solidified over the centuries. It is now the "traits of a separated community which mark Mennonites throughout the world," says Mennonite historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz.<sup>20</sup>

As is obvious, this dualistic, sectarian imagination not only sets up a split between church and world but also declares one side of the split good and the other evil (an obviously absolutistic declaration!). This aspect of the sectarian worldview is described succinctly by Calvin Redekop:

The sectarian cognitive orientation recognizes two worlds. The one is ruled by Satan, the other by God: Everything falls into one or the other category. There is never any doubt into which kingdom a certain thing falls. Much of sectarian life is focused on keeping the sense of boundaries very clear.<sup>21</sup>

Although the above description reflects sectarianism at its most extreme, modifications of this basic dualistic pattern (evil world/good church) are found even in more sophisticated forms of the two-kingdom theology,<sup>22</sup> a point I will return to in the discussion on the apathetic middle-class.

### **A. *Peace Shall Destroy Many*: The Authoritarian Sect**

The setting for Rudy Wiebe's first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is Wapiti, a small Mennonite enclave in Saskatachewan, in 1944. The residents of Wapiti have all fled persecution and famine in Russia, and while the community has enjoyed several decades of prosperity and peace, the memory of previous suffering lingers. The founder and spiritual leader, the "rock" of the community, is Peter Block. During the course of the novel, the stability and separateness of the community is threatened both by the seeming encroachment of the war-torn world and by internal community tensions. Block and the majority of the church staunchly resist these challenges, while Thom Wiens and several other young people begin to seriously question the church's pacifistic stance and, increasingly, the worldview Block has so carefully engineered for the community.

The authoritarian Block is the symbol of the absolutizing imagination in PSDM. He alone always knows the right thing to do and directs the community accordingly.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, his ability to absolutize, always to know the correct way of thinking, feeling and acting and never to doubt his certainty, seems the reason he is given both spiritual and social power in the community. Block is able to play the role of authoritarian father because the community has taken on the role of children, receiving all opinions from Block and counting upon him to resolve disputes between the family members and to discipline accordingly. They rely on him to keep the family safe from the "world," which Block attempts to do by buying out all the non-Mennonites living in the area. He also "protects" his children by self-consciously limiting their awareness of the world, censoring

how much and what kind of information gets to them.

Obviously, the abuses that can result from the bestowal of almost total spiritual and social authority on one man is the antithesis of the Anabaptist belief in the priesthood of all believers. Members of the Wapiti community would not, however, say they have given Block power but rather that he has been "called by God" to leadership because of his spiritual gifts. Sacralizing Block's authority as such obscures the social dynamics at work, for many members of the community are financially indebted (and feel emotionally so) to Block, since, as the first settler in Wapiti, he had the resources to loan money to almost all of the later settlers. As sociologist Calvin Redekop has said, many Mennonites have never consciously acknowledged that individuals actually possess power (because of class status or personal power) and use it — even in religious settings.<sup>24</sup>

It would be a mistake to view this picture of the authoritarian sect Wiebe has painted as an aberration in Mennonite history. A host of Mennonite artists, sociologists and psychologists confirm there is a strong tendency toward authoritarianism and absolutism among Mennonites, especially in particular times in Mennonite history.<sup>25</sup> Even when an individual deacon like Block or a group of elders are not in control, the Bible or community norms may serve the authoritarian purpose of dictating absolutes that must be unquestionably obeyed by the church members. The extent to which this authoritarianism has alienated and embittered Mennonites, many of whom have left the church, can be seen through even a cursory reading of contemporary Mennonite literature. Many Mennonite authors who write about their religious background mention the oppressive legalism and hypocrisy of authoritarianism.

I now want to turn to an examination of the particular idols that result from the absolutizing and dualistic imagination operating within the setting of the authoritarian sect: the idols of ethnicity and the proximate utopia.

### **1. The Idol of Ethnicity**

Redekop says that Mennonites have constantly been corrupted by the "natural tendency to turn inward and form an ethnic group."<sup>26</sup> Wiebe illustrates this tendency well in the Wapiti community's absolutization of their particular ethnic cultural traditions and values, which include, in Block's view, the German language, "cleanliness, frugality, hard work and moral decency" (202). Block's absolutization of these values only serves to reinforce the rigorous sectarianism of the community, since the neighboring Metis people, who are regarded as filthy, lazy and morally flawed, are then effectively barred from the "sanctified" community. This becomes evident to Thom when he is confronted by Block's son Pete about Thom's Bible lessons with the Metis. Even if converted, says Pete, Metis people could never join the Wapiti Mennonite

Church because "they don't live like us," by which he means they don't have the same standards of household cleanliness as the Mennonites.

When a group absolutizes God's will, then the "sacred"—that which is considered to be "of God"—too often is merely that group's ingrained prejudices. Indeed, in Wapiti the reification of certain ethnic cultural values serves as a rather thinly concealed disguise for the community's racism and class prejudice.

## **2. The Idol of the Proximate Utopia**

The proximate utopia is formed by the desire to establish a pure, separated community where members can remain uncontaminated by the world's sordidness. Although the entire Wapiti community shares this desire, it is Block alone who is almost demonically possessed by this idea and who has the social power to attempt to make it concrete. In his determination to achieve what he feels is the greatest good, seemingly no evil is off limits to Block, including threatening to kill the Metis Louis and eventually driving Louis' family (and all the Metis) out of Wapiti.

The need to create a pure community sets up the most severe dualism between the church and the world, and in order to maintain this strict boundary the purity of the former and utter evil of the latter has constantly to be absolutized. Block and his community project their own evil onto others in the "world" until this evil is seen as exclusively theirs. For instance, Metis people are viewed as lustful, carnal animals; the war-torn world is the only place where people hate and hurt each other. This, of course, puts tremendous pressure on the church to be absolutely pure. Because the church alone must be the realm of godliness and harmony, community members tend to ignore or smother any evidence to the contrary, resulting in a "false peace" that is concerned only that all church conflicts be smoothed over as quickly as possible.<sup>27</sup> Any criticism of the church cannot, obviously, be tolerated. Additionally, any traces of weakness or "impurity" in the community must be rationalized away or punished and quickly removed from sight. Block adopts the latter practice when he excommunicates a church member for marrying a Metis woman and threatens to expel his only daughter from his house for bearing a child out of wedlock.

Block's absolutism and dualism end up producing what Thomas Merton has called "the most awful tyranny of the proximate utopia, where the last sins are currently being eliminated and where, tomorrow, there will be no more sins because all sinners will have been wiped out."<sup>28</sup> Ironically, then, Block is the spiritual leader of a church, historically founded on pacifism, that is better known for the violence it inflicts on its own and those outside the community than for its forgiving love.

## **B. "The Vietnam Call of Sam Reimer" — The Apathetic Middle Class**

The main character in "The Vietnam Call of Samuel Reimer" is Sam Reimer, a middle-aged farmer who is at first comfortably unaware of the world around him. He doesn't like to read newspapers because "there's always so much murdering and things in them" (163); the most he knows of the Vietnam War is that "the U.S. is bombing communists there or something" (163). Sam's complacency is shaken, however, when he hears a voice in the early morning hours from "the God of your fathers, the Lord your God" telling him to "go and proclaim peace in Vietnam." The rest of the story deals with Sam's growing conscientization to the suffering in the world around him and his poignantly pathetic attempt to be faithful to this call from God. He is blocked at every attempt to follow this call, however, by his wife Emily, his pastor and the Mennonite community.

Apathy comes from the Greek word, *apatheia*, which literally means "nonsuffering." Theologian Dorothee Soelle builds on this definition to describe middle-class apathy as the "inability to suffer," born of a people who not only no longer experience the absence of essential commodities or hunger and cold but who have reached the point of material satiation.<sup>29</sup> The inability to suffer has dire consequences for the compassion level of a people, she says, for only those who suffer (either actually or vicariously)<sup>30</sup> will work for the abolition of suffering. The great crime, then, of white, middle-class people is not that they were born into a privileged position but that they can "turn at every moment" to a position of suffering with the oppressed and participating in their struggle for liberation and do not do so.<sup>31</sup>

Soelle's analysis of middle-class apathy describes well the world Wiebe portrays in VCSR. Unlike the isolated sectarians in PSDM, these Canadian Mennonites have largely assimilated into mainstream society and have adopted its values. They are an economically privileged people, cushioned by their wealth from the suffering caused by deprivation or oppression. They are "psychically numbed," unable to feel deeply the suffering of others and correspondingly to act on that feeling.<sup>32</sup> In VCSR, this is as true for those Mennonites who are completely hooked on materialism (like Sam's wife Emily) as for those who pay lip service to relevant social issues (like Sam's pastor). This apathy, combined with the same absolutizing and dualistic imagination at work in the authoritarian milieu, results in two different idols in this Mennonite community: materialism and ethical purity.

### **1. The Idol of Materialism**

In VCSR, Wiebe bitingly details the apathetic stupor of this Canadian Mennonite community. Sam is perpetually being nagged by his wife Emily to make more money so they can fulfill the Canadian dream. She is "afraid to show my kids in church" (160) because they don't have calfskin gloves and other signs of "proper dress." At the end of the story, after Sam's death, Emily collects on

his insurance policies and returns from a meeting with her investment brokers in Winnipeg in a new car; her neighbors can't tell for dust whether she has "moved up to a Chrysler, a Cadillac or a Thunderbird" (180). Earlier in the story, in a desperate attempt to get attention for his cause, Sam asks a newspaper in Winnipeg to do a story on him. They refuse because the "Mennonites had pretty well lived down the problem of their pacifism in World War II, and some were now big-business advertisers" (176).

Wiebe's portrayal concurs with sociologists' conclusions that Mennonites have "made their accommodation with bourgeois, capitalist society."<sup>33</sup> Due in part to their values of hard work and frugality, many Mennonites have economically "made it," yet Calvin Redekop says most Mennonites are unaware of the tension between economic prosperity in a capitalistic society and their own confessional heritage (not to mention the Christian gospel).<sup>34</sup> Those not ignorant of this fact simply may not care, he says. Accordingly, Mennonites have become "quietly patriotic and nationalistic"<sup>35</sup> as their economic wealth increases.

I believe there is a subtle form of the church/world dualism happening here. Here, the world is not necessarily regarded as evil (and, in fact, is to be enjoyed for its material pleasures); however, the welfare of those people living in the world is not a deep concern of the church. Compassion is bound by the familiar, associated only with personal relationships in the community and divorced from the world's social problems. A church member's social obligation is limited to members of the community or, even more so, immediate family members. For instance, Sam, who is deeply criticized for being willing to "abandon" his family in order to go to Vietnam, becomes painfully aware of how a legitimate and natural concern for loved ones becomes a destructive form of "navel-gazing" that saps all attention away from concerns falling outside the family circle:

The kids . . . have got to be cared for. I know, that's how my parents lived too. Care for the children God has given you. Sure. But . . . maybe they wouldn't be such brats if I hadn't always been working just for them so much. They're not everything on heaven and earth. Compared to some things, they're maybe nothing much at all (170).

Sam cannot accept the ideology that makes a cult of the family at the expense of other human beings: "In Vietnam a kid is being fried into a cripple. And I worry about mine don't have a Chrysler to go to church in?" (172).

## **2. The Idol of Ethical Purity**

Sam's wife Emily, under the sway of the idol of materialism, doesn't even pretend to have an interest in social issues. But there is a more nuanced form of idolatry in this story, harder to spot because it is so well disguised as a real concern for social justice. It is the idol of ethical purity, and its adherents will "get involved" with social issues only at a safe distance where they will be



shielded from ambiguous ethical situations. Scott Holland calls this “rocking-chair piety” and says American [sic] Mennonites are particularly prone to it:

Often the church has found it both convenient and easy to offer prophetic critiques of American politics and culture while quietly rocking in the comfort and security of her own private realm. Such a quietistic piety is indeed safe. It enables one to offer righteous judgments of the public square without the risk of soiling one’s hands by living in the public arena.<sup>36</sup>

The pastor in VCSR is the symbol of this ethical purity. He is a man of all talk and no action. Compared to Sam, who has been “called” by the Living God and who cannot remove the images of children fried into cripples from his mind, the pastor is a dispassionate bureaucrat, speaking only in abstract, general facts about the war “as if dictating” (163). He blithely mouths profound-sounding phrases about how the Mennonite Church “as neo-pacifists must share and restore the dignity of man to an afflicted world” (164), yet discourages Sam’s attempts to do exactly, concretely that. Instead, he gives Sam a complete file of papers and periodicals on Vietnam (“for, against, in the middle”) (165).

Wiebe also indicts the vast network of Mennonite peace and service committees, accusing them of shielding themselves from human suffering with a buffer of bureaucratese and, thus, being incapable of true compassion. Sam’s urgent, life-changing call to action is sapped of all life and spirit by the time it gets through the cogs of the Mennonite machine. Not surprisingly, the Mennonite bureaucracy rejects Sam’s project as “too likely to raise derision and suspicion” (170) among both church members and government agencies.

Sam’s pastor and the Mennonite peace committees only recognize the commonsensical and convenient; their material pragmatism binds them to the conventional. They are thus incapable of being open to surprise, to the fact that the “kingdom makes itself known in the most unexpected ways.”<sup>37</sup> They cannot comprehend why Sam would go to Vietnam without a plan and are mystified by his assertion that he will know what to do when he gets there. Sam is trying to be faithful, while the pastor and peace committees are more concerned their programs be successful and efficient.

The idol of ethical purity is maintained, I believe, by the church/world dualism because this dualism enables the church to believe it can avoid being “soiled” by the world so long as it does not actively participate in the world’s affairs. As Gordon Kaufman says, the church assumes that its “ground and basis were other than and independent of the historical context in which the church (finds) herself,”<sup>38</sup> a decidedly ahistorical viewpoint that does not take into account the extent to which all modern people—especially those living in developed, industrialized countries—are interwoven into a complex political, economic and social web that spans the globe. The oft-used rationale that Mennonites transform the world “by example” erroneously assumes Mennonites are truly separate from the world to begin with and thus do not participate in social sin. Simply by being a part of U.S. society in a world so interconnected,

Mennonites thoroughly participate in the world and “take a stand” whether they choose to recognize this or not. And by being silent citizens of a country that inflicts economic, political and military violence on others, Mennonites too have taken up the sword.

The idol of ethical purity is also maintained by the absolutizing imagination. Because the absolutizing imagination needs to have sharp delineations between good and evil, it cannot tolerate ambiguity—a state where, by definition, ethical purity is impossible. Sam Reimer recognizes that the call to love and suffer with others, no matter how absurd this call may seem, will force us into action and its attendant ethical quandaries. It will make us perfectionist-seeking, embarrassment-avoiding Mennonites uncomfortable.

The Mennonite emphasis on ethical purity leaves us on the periphery of society, where we think we can maintain safe distance from the world’s power struggles and decision-making processes. As Roy Vogt says, from this “safe” position, Mennonites

promote ethical guidelines which may have considerable relevance for small, highly dedicated communities, but which contribute little to the solution of racial, economic and military oppression in the world.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the story, Sam Reimer dies because he did not act on his conviction. Symbolically, I believe Wiebe is suggesting we all die to our humanity in some way when we do not act, when our fear of being wrong or appearing foolish or our need to maintain purity overrides our moral agency. Wiebe is insisting that social situations which cause human suffering are not just discussion topics for Bible studies or agenda items for peace committees but “simple elemental commands to personal action.”<sup>40</sup> And they are finally, as with Sam Reimer, a call to conversion.

### **C. *My Lovely Enemy* and the Parabolic, Holistic Imagination**

So far I have attempted to ferret out the idols created by the absolutizing and dualistic imagination in two different Mennonite milieus. But what would a Mennonite religious imagination that is not absolutistic and dualistic look like? Wiebe offers hints that can help answer that question in *My Lovely Enemy*, which I believe models a parabolic, holistic imagination.

The main character in *My Lovely Enemy* (MLE) is James Dyck, a middle-aged, middle-class history professor, happily married and the father of one daughter. Unlike Thom Wiens and Sam Reimer, James is thoroughly a man of the “world,” his only remaining connections with his Mennonite past being his mother, who still lives in his Mennonite hometown, and a head full of Bible memory verses and a nagging bitterness over his failed relationship with his authoritarian father. James’ otherwise comfortable life is blown apart when he meets and almost instantly falls in love with Gillian, the young wife of a fellow

history professor and lapsed Mennonite. Throughout the course of the novel, James' deepening relationship with Gillian, his "lovely enemy," forces him to question almost everything he thought was solid in his life.

MLE is "strange terrain," says one reviewer, a land through which the reader will, like James, find her/himself "groping, stumbling, often puzzled, often disoriented."<sup>41</sup> Throughout the course of the novel, our familiar roadmaps are taken from us one by one. Wiebe vigorously questions social and cultural ideas about monogamous marriage, sexuality, institutional religion, concepts/images of God; he shifts narrative perspectives from past to present or person to person, sometimes in the same sentence; at times he forfeits logical sentence structure; by the use of magic realism he plunges the reader into a world where the boundaries between fantasy and reality, the ridiculous and sublime are blurred. The reader is often left stranded, feeling as if there is no solid ground left—not cultural/social norms, nor conventional ideas of "reality," nor our standard concepts of time and logic. This is exactly Wiebe's intention. He wants to make us aware of the way we set up mental categories to divide our experience—that otherwise bewildering onrush of sensation—into compartments of good and bad, fact and myth, believable and unbelievable, possible and impossible, and then smash these divisions so we are freed to see the world in new, often shocking and unpredictable ways. By the end of the novel, when James raises his mother from the grave at her funeral, one is stunned both because it is too fantastic to believe and because, after the previous 200-page rollercoaster ride, one also realizes the "world is too amazing for anyone to doubt any possibility" (158).

This process throughout the novel of disorientation and consequent reorientation to a fuller truth or vision is an example of what I call the "parabolic imagination," a way of "composing the real" based on the parables of Jesus.<sup>42</sup> This imagination stands in utter opposition to the absolutizing imagination and its resulting idolatries, for parables take seriously the fact that all religious language is a human construction, a finite, limited attempt to apprehend the sacred or transcendent. Language attempts to express through images and concepts what is ultimately beyond human expression; all religious language is thus metaphorical, pointing to something beyond itself. Parables are elaborate metaphors in the form of a story that work by a process of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. They orient the reader by beginning in the familiar, mundane world of conventional standards and expectations; they disorient by upsetting this familiarity through a radical challenge of the "accepted social, economic and mythical structures people build for their own comfort and security."<sup>43</sup> Parables question the world we have constructed in order to open us to a totally new perspective. For Jesus, parables were the "implicitly revolutionary" linguistic vehicle by which a reorientation to the "upside-down kingdom"<sup>44</sup>—the destabilizing, inclusive *basileia* of God—is able to break into the world.

Yet even as parables reorient us to a way of living based on the *basileia* of

God, they do not allow us merely to set up another system of rules, for the parabolic process perpetually demands a deep and abiding acknowledgement of the relativity of our human models of reality and, thus, the open, tentative nature of all human projects. Parables are not, therefore, didactic; they do not spoon-feed the listener/reader “answers” to moral, spiritual or religious questions (as Block does). Rather, parables “tease the imagination into participatory thinking:”

Parables cause us to think about life under the reign of God, and... while giving no definition about that life, provide models of it.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, as James experiences the process of the parabolic imagination (orientation, disorientation, reorientation), he is being reoriented to a more holistic imagination. At first, James is completely confident of the ability of his rationality and logic to answer (and ask) all questions of importance. In his former job as a computer programmer he found comfort in the “cold precision of mathematics, the absolute impersonal logic of it that makes conscience... unnecessary” (1). James longs for “repeatable logic, clear balance” (133) and thus must stand outside the often confusing welter of human experience, which is exactly what he does in his new profession as a historian. He gladly takes on the role of passive watcher, comfortably disconnected from the lives he is observing, an anonymous omniscient who reduces personal and collective histories to bits of data he accumulates and processes on his computer. All the while, however, James senses that life is much more like a “living stream never at rest and forever moving into an unknown land” (3) than he is willing to acknowledge.

Almost immediately, James’ comfortable passivity is upset for good when Gillian appears in the Micromaterials Reading Room with him and seemingly within seconds is sitting on his lap kissing him. For the rest of the novel, Gillian acts as James’ guide through a world whose hard edges begin to dissolve before his eyes. Although James has moved far beyond his authoritarian upbringing that left no room for surprise or question or ambiguity, Gillian pushes James to further break the ropes binding his imagination, to let go even more his conventional way of looking at the world: “You’re still too careful,” (14) she tells him. In a playful, imaginative way, Gillian forces James to recognize the tenuousness of the “reality” he takes for granted. She is asking James to leave behind his world based only on observable facts, rationality and logic—his “life without ambiguity” (145)—and start the “trail beyond words” (58).

James is further pushed along this trail when Jesus appears twice, in a Calgary hotel room and a university library, to talk with him. At first, James seems to regard these conversations as opportunities to have all his puzzles concerning faith and morality solved. He is constantly frustrated by Jesus’ ambiguous answers: “Can’t you ever say anything straight out?” (81) he asks Jesus. James wants certitude, while Jesus gives only more penetrating, unanswerable questions. When James objects that “it’s pretty hard to live, hanging

by threads," Jesus answers, "You need more faith then (because) it's really humanity's most natural position" (135). But Jesus is not asking James to return to the "faith of his fathers," i.e. the absolutizing, dualistic imagination. Jesus' implicit point throughout the conversations is that faith must be constantly tested and, thus, must be flexible enough to handle new challenges. Furthermore, Jesus wants James to shed his image of God as a domineering Mennonite father writ large; he wants James to see that his conventional "God-thought" has limited God too much. In the following conversation Jesus hints at the destructive consequences of such limitations:

[Jesus]: The story we live in is not so flat. It is in God we live, and move, and have our being. You limit God's breath too much, to one custom's way of doing and thinking.

[James]: It's more or less all we have to live by, everyone, by some accepted order. It holds our worlds together.

[Jesus]: And fine worlds they have been and are, aren't they.

He [Jesus] is sardonic now beyond all irony. (84)

Ultimately, Jesus is reorienting James to a holistic vision of God and the world, one characterized by eros. Christian thought has traditionally regarded agape as being most indicative of divine love and, thus, the highest form of love. Agapic love, however, suggests a dualistic, lopsided picture of a God able to love wretched humanity despite our sin and with no thought of receiving love in return. Erotic love, however, finds the loved one infinitely valuable and desires above all to be united with its love.<sup>46</sup> Eros expresses our yearning for each other, our passion for creation, our desire—indeed, our need—for wholeness, true community. Eros can be envisioned as "relational power," the force that moves in, with and through humanity, binding us together.<sup>47</sup> This erotic orientation is what James is looking for:

I'm looking for bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh like they did in that garden. . . the long desire for that celestial harmony of one name Adam which we all had before ever we started hiding (133).

James is also seeking a new God, one who can be loved with abandon, and in this new holistic vision God is imaged as the very embodiment of eros. God is not here the stern (yet supposedly ever-loving) father but one who is "hopelessly, passionately in love with the world." God is no "philosopher's abstraction," says Jesus; God is a Lover, "angry, jealous, tender, forgiving, head over heels in love and he won't let you go, he'll wait for years, a real fool" (138).

This vision of divine love as eros helps to heal false dualisms, especially the spirit/body split that serves to alienate humans from their bodies and God (who is "pure Spirit") from the material world. In one conversation, Jesus tells James he had earnestly hoped Christians would be beyond the neo-platonist body/spirit split (135). But the church fathers worked that "awesome gulf" into the

heart of their theology, and white western Christianity has carried this blasphemy with it ever since. And it is, indeed, a blasphemy, for Jesus tells an astonished James that God is both spirit and body and is thus capable of loving the world as a lover, both bodily and spiritually.

Wiebe here is trying to redeem our bodies and the material world as that which God finds infinitely valuable, as "holy ground." He wants to heal the angry split between the creator and creation (although he does not want to dissolve it completely). He is also suggesting that just as God as Lover somehow loves and knows us "carnally," so do we know and love God through our flesh, blood and bone.<sup>48</sup> That is, we experience divine love through our passionate love for each other; God is thus embodied in the world when we love each other. This holistic vision is ultimately a humanizing one, for it radically affirms the value and goodness—indeed the sacrality—of this world. The world is not here a place of evil to be avoided but the site of God's loving, healing presence, a view more in line with Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's claim that the central Christian vision is not the holiness or purity of an elect few but the wholeness of all creation.<sup>49</sup>

This utopic vision of wholeness is illustrated beautifully in the last pages of the novel. James resurrects his mother and proves love as divine eros to be a flame that "no water on earth can quench... or floods drown" (257), capable of destroying all separations—including the most final one of death. Then James, his mother and all his loved ones settle down to a picnic in a hayfield where the potato salad and iced tea, given to them by a farmer, miraculously multiply. In this *basileia* of God, where everything has been made new, James looks out upon those he loves and finally "knows them all, not distinct and separate, even himself, but all one." (262)

### Conclusion

The belief underlying this paper has been that Mennonites need to be "converted" from a basically idolatrous imagination (the absolutizing and dualistic) to a new religious imagination if they are to continue their historic mission of helping to transform both the individual and society. What this new imagination might look like has only been hinted at in the previous description of the parabolic, holistic imagination. All Mennonites in the words of John Lapp, need to become "constructive scholars in the sense of creating and implementing new models, concepts and visions for realizing the Kingdom [sic] of God on earth in the future."<sup>50</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Leo Driedger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1988), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>See Hans-Jürgen Goertz's prologue in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Calvin Redekop and Sam Steiner, eds., (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), p. 1-11. Interestingly, Tom Yoder Neufeld claims that our historic countercultural identity actually keeps us from recognizing the almost thoroughly establishment character of our modern church. See his article "Christian Counterculture: Ecclesia and Establishment," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63(April 1989):193-209.

<sup>3</sup>What I am calling the religious imagination here is practically identical to Gordon Kaufman's concept of the theological imagination. See especially his *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup>Leo Driedger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup>William Lynch's definition from *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>I agree with ethicist June O'Connor that our basic moral commitments are rooted in our interpretive framework or worldview. Therefore, in order to do proper ethics, these worldviews must first be brought to consciousness and examined and then either re-accepted, rejected or modified. See her article "On Doing Religious Ethics" in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf and Mary D. Pellauer, eds., (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 265-284.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in an article by Jeff Gundy, "Separation and Transformation: Tradition and Audience for Three Mennonite Poets," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4(1986):68.

<sup>8</sup>Hildi Froese Tiessen, "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," in Calvin Redekop and Sam Steiner, *Mennonite Identity*...., p. 235.

<sup>9</sup>Indeed, on the first jacket for *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, he is described as a "young theologian," a designation he found "pretentious." See his article "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5(1987):19.

<sup>10</sup>From an interview by Stephen Scobie, "For Goodness' Sake," *Books in Canada* (February, 1980):3.

<sup>11</sup>Harry Loewen, "Mennonite Literature in Canada: Beginnings, Reception and Study," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1(1983):119-132.

<sup>12</sup>I want to stress that the social-cultural settings and "idols" I will be describing are evident in the "real world," so to speak, not just in Wiebe's imagination. I am using Wiebe's books as illustrations of dynamics I have experienced and continue to see within the Mennonite Church. In brief, I am talking about the "real world" through art, rather than talking about art in and of itself.

<sup>13</sup>This is, in part, how Gordon Kaufman defines idolatry in his essay "Theology as Public Vocation" in *The Vocation of the Theologian*, Theodore W. Jennings, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 49-66.

<sup>14</sup>William Lynch, *Images of Hope* (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 90.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>17</sup>For this reason, most Mennonites would not say they have a "religious imagination" but rather that they have "the Truth."

<sup>18</sup>Indicators of a dualistic worldview include, according to Leo Driedger, the formation of "ideological (fundamentalist theology) and sociological (ethnic communities) subsystems which insulate and sometimes isolate individuals and groups," a belief in an otherworldly God and a view of the world as corrupt. Dualists, he insists, will often be more concerned with the "social control of

deviants" in the community than larger societal issues. From *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*, pp. 152-3. See his entire chapter "Dualist and Wholist Views of God and the World."

<sup>19</sup>See Calvin Redekop's discussion of this point in *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), especially chapters 1 and 18, and Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

<sup>20</sup>Calvin Redekop and Sam Steiner, *Mennonite Identity*..., p. 4.

<sup>21</sup>Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup>Peter J. Foth, pastor of the Hamburg Mennonite Church, called the Bender school's "Anabaptist vision" not only a "new infusion of an age-old dualistic view of the world in which I am good and the others are bad (the worst possible form of self-deceit)"... but above all a "historical construction, directed by certain interests for the planting and re-forming of Mennonite congregations." See "Radicals are a Minority," *Festival Quarterly* 17(Spring, 1990):18.

<sup>23</sup>From a faith development position, this authoritarianism is extremely inhibitive to the growth of a mature faith because it keeps adherents locked in a childlike dependency upon external authority, rather than encouraging them to come to their own sense of internal authority. Ironically, Block says Metis people can't enter the church because they are spiritually childish, another example of his (and the community's) tendency to project their own weaknesses onto those outside the church.

<sup>24</sup>Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup>See especially chapter 6 and 7 in Beulah Stauffer Hostetler's *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987) and pages 62-70 in Redekop's *Mennonite Society*. Both describe the shift from congregationalism to authoritarian control by a bishop or group of elders.

<sup>26</sup>Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, p. 141.

<sup>27</sup>At the end of the novel, Thom finally recognizes that "true peace" comes only when one is able to confront "one's own two faces," (238) that is, when one acknowledges in oneself and one's community the capacity for both good and evil.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 14.

<sup>29</sup>Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

<sup>30</sup>Compassion literally means "to have passion with" or "to suffer with."

<sup>31</sup>Soelle, *Suffering*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>See Joanna Macy's book *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983) for elaboration of this point.

<sup>33</sup>Hans-Jürgen Goertz in Calvin Redekop and Sam Steiner, *Mennonite Identity*..., p. 11.

<sup>34</sup>Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, pp. 207-210. Redekop also cites studies by Melvin Gingerich and Roy Vogt that confirm this.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>36</sup>"God in Public: A Modest Proposal for a Quest for a Contemporary North American Anabaptist Paradigm," *Conrad Grebel Review* 4:44.

<sup>37</sup>Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Christian Counterculture...", p. 193. Neufeld says this is because lived Mennonite reality is mostly premised on the basis of class interests, and our social organizations often merely serve to nurture and protect these interests.

<sup>38</sup>Gordon Kaufman, *Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Mennonite Essays* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1979), p. 102.

<sup>39</sup>From an essay by Vogt in Harry Loewen's *Why I am a Mennonite* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), p. 308.



<sup>40</sup>David L. Jeffrey, "Biblical Hermeneutic and Family History in Contemporary Canadian Fiction: Wiebe and Laurence," *Mosaic* 3(Sept., 1978):102.

<sup>41</sup>W. J. Keith, "Sex and the Dead," *Canadian Forum* (May, 1983):29.

<sup>42</sup>I am heavily dependent in the following discussion on Sallie McFague's analysis of parables in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 42-54.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup>In *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), New Testament scholar Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza uses the Greek word "basileia" as a substitute for the sexist, monarchical word "kingdom."

<sup>45</sup>Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 46. The shift from didacticism to the parabolic "method" is reflected even in Wiebe's literary style from PSDM, which has been criticized for being preachy, to MLE.

<sup>46</sup>McFague makes this point in her section on "God as Love" in *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 131.

<sup>47</sup>This point has become the basis for the "relational" theologies of feminist theologians such as Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock.

<sup>48</sup>Poet Patrick Friesen is, I believe, making a similar point (with some qualifications) in his book of poems *Flicker and Hawk*. As Jeff Gundy has said, these poems reflect "a search for a present sense of relation in which lover and God are repeatedly connected and sometimes merged almost beyond distinction." From "Voice and History in Patrick Friesen," *The New Quarterly* 10(Spring/Summer 1990):144.

<sup>49</sup>Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 120.

<sup>50</sup>John Lapp, "Mennonite Studies: Preparing for the Next Agenda," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1(1983):201-208.