

Sacred, Secular and Material: The Thought of J.J. Siemens

Hans P. Werner, *University of Manitoba, Winnipeg*

Mennonites in Canada have made history. This is really an achievement, and what pleases me so much is that Mennonites are demonstrating, true to their pacifist background, that such peace industries are feasible, ... we are producing oil. ... oil that feeds people and keeps them healthy and strong.¹

With unconcealed exuberance, J.J. Siemens reported to his daughter the start of production at the Co-op Vegetable Oils (C.V.O.) plant in Altona, Manitoba in the spring of 1946. The completion of the edible oil crushing facility was the crowning achievement of Siemens's community development efforts in Manitoba's Mennonite West Reserve. J.J. Siemens was an avid supporter and organizer of co-op, educational and farm improvement organizations such as the Co-op Vegetable Oils and the Rhineland Agricultural Society. He was active in the West Reserve at a time when Mennonite rural culture was being challenged by increasing urbanization and dramatic changes in agriculture. This paper will examine one person's thinking about relations between church, society and economics during a period of secularization and modernization of rural Mennonite life. J.J. Siemens's thought will be discussed with an eye to understanding how Mennonites came to terms with the increasing pressures to become a more secular society such as that which surrounded them in Manitoba. The classic study of Mennonites in Manitoba by E.K. Francis paints a picture of

increasing secularization stimulated by the economic crisis of the Depression and the demographic and economic changes that occurred in the fifteen years thereafter.² Secularization was stimulated during and particularly after World War II by increasing mechanization of farm work and the commercialization of the postwar agricultural economy. Earlier, Mennonite life on the West Reserve had been based on the rhythms of peasant agriculture and, in spite of significant numbers of Mennonites living in the growing towns of the West Reserve, Mennonite life retained its rural flavour until after the war.³

The dramatic change in rural life on the Western plains in this period has been a recurring theme for historians. Gerald Friesen suggests that after 1940 "the institutions of the rural west... changed so much as to be almost unrecognizable to the pioneer."⁴ Mennonites in Western Canada were not immune from these trends. Ted Regehr's recent synthesis of postwar Mennonite history suggests that the period required "that priorities established by ... [Mennonite] congregations and communities had to be reconciled and, if that was not possible, altered to meet the dictates of economic efficiency, the tyranny of commodity markets, the capital requirements of increased mechanization, and a significantly reduced need for labour previously provided by family and community members."⁵ Mennonites attempted to adapt to the changes in rural life by fashioning a new, modified culture that represented a local response to the 'Great Disjuncture' they were experiencing. Royden Loewen's account of the East Reserve argues that its adaptation to the postwar world was particularly local. He suggests that "the values and social formations at the 'local level' interacted with the modern industrializing forces to shape particular local cultures." The Mennonites of the East Reserve shaped their response to the changes in postwar society, assuming the new society's "social characteristics" but not in contradiction to established constructions of "gender, rurality and ethnicity."⁶ Manitoba's West Reserve also adapted to the realities of the Depression and the changes brought by the war in unique ways. J.J. Siemens was an influential figure in the Mennonite West Reserve from the 1930s to the mid-1950s and his thought was pivotal in shaping this adaptation.

J.J. Siemens's role in the co-operative movement has given him a prominent place in the history of Southern Manitoba mutual aid and co-operative organizations.⁷ He has also made cameo appearances in many histories of Mennonite settlement and adaptation in Manitoba. The earliest were in works by two contemporaries whom he knew personally and with whom he had shared ideas and opinions. E.K. Francis and Frank H. Epp championed J.J. Siemens as the Johann Cornies of Manitoba Mennonites. Cornies was a nineteenth century leader of Mennonites in Russia who used his wealth and energy to promote modernization and social change in the isolated colonies of South Russia. E.K. Francis, an Austrian born sociologist who studied the Mennonite Reserves in the late 1940s and 1950s, characterized Siemens's role as being similar "to that of Cornies in the Molotschna colony a hundred years ago."⁸ Frank H. Epp, the writer of the first two volumes of the *Mennonites in Canada* series echoed Francis, calling Siemens's activities "reminiscent of the work of Johann Cornies

in southern Russia” but limited the comparison to “economic and community leadership,” not ideologies.⁹ Later authors have tended to focus more on these ideological dimensions of Siemens’s role in Mennonite society. Esther Epp-Tiessen’s history of Altona and Gerhard Ens’s account of the Municipality of Rhineland emphasize Siemens’s critique of capitalism and espousal of co-operative principles.¹⁰ Ted Regehr’s third volume of the *Mennonites in Canada* simply considers Siemens’s ideas as “secular and socialist.”¹¹

J.J. Siemens was born in the village of Schoental in 1896 on the homestead of his pioneer father Johan Siemens near Altona in the West Reserve. He attended grade school and then graduated from the Mennonite Educational Institute, less than a mile away in Altona. His formal education was complete after he attended normal school in Winnipeg in preparation for a teaching career. Siemens taught school for ten years in such villages as Grosweide, Lowe Farm and Halbstadt. While teaching in Halbstadt, he met Marie Heinrichs and they were married in 1922. In 1929, Siemens took over the family farm from his father who retired to nearby Altona. The Siemens family moved to Schoental and a period of active community involvement began for the 33-year-old farmer.¹² J.J. Siemens was active in community and co-operative activities until the 1950s. He moved to Winnipeg in the early 1950s, but returned to Altona seven or eight years later. In 1958, he suffered a stroke that limited his public activities; he died in Altona on July 7, 1963 after a brief illness.

The Depression of the 1930s that followed closely on the heels of J.J. Siemens’s return to the farm had a dramatic and lasting impression on his thought. A 1936 survey conducted by one of the organizations with which Siemens was involved suggested that over half of the Rural Municipality of Rhineland’s farmers were in danger of losing their holdings through foreclosure or bankruptcy.¹³ The depression’s economic struggles contributed to the ultimate failure of important community economic institutions such as the Bergthaler *Waisenamt* in 1931. The *Waisenamt* was an institution established by Mennonites in Russia for managing estates on behalf of widows and orphans. Together with the mutual fire insurance protection provided by the *Brandordnung* the *Waisenamt* was a pillar of Mennonite security in the face of the vicissitudes of pioneer life. The failure of Mennonite economic institutions seems to have spurred Siemens into action and in January 1931, together with five friends, he formed the Rhineland Agricultural Society and soon became its Vice President. The motive for this self-improvement association lay in the group’s conviction “that only by united action could their community survive the disintegrating shock of the Depression on the agricultural and rural life of their area.” Later in the same year, the Rhineland Consumers Co-op was formed and, although Siemens was not on the Provisional Board of Directors, he became President at the reorganization meeting following its first annual meeting.¹⁴

The alternative advocated by J.J. Siemens as a solution to the problems of the depression was co-operation. ‘Co-operation’ became the most used word in the many speeches Siemens made in the three decades of his active public life.¹⁵

Although Regehr's label of being a "socialist" certainly applies to his later thinking, Siemens's early ideas of co-operation came out of his experience of the depression rather than from any political ideology.

Siemens saw two major flaws in the Mennonite community's response to the difficulties of the depression. The first of these was the failure of Mennonite mutual aid organizations to function as the community's buffers against adversity. As Siemens wrote in a *Mennonite Life* article in the 1940s, a "great many old and young people were exceedingly disturbed when they found out that our economic institutions such as the *Waisenamt* and fire insurance organizations could not withstand the impact [of the Depression] and had to go into bankruptcy."¹⁶ By the 1920s both the Bergthaler and Sommerfelder *Waisenamts* had begun to take deposits and make loans very much like banks and credit unions. Already in 1919, the Bergthaler *Waisenamt* had over \$920,000 in deposits with only \$63,000 of this deposited on behalf of widows and orphans. What had begun as a mutual aid organization had by the 1930s become a commercial organization albeit with limited or non-existent reserves. Both *Waisenamts* proved unable to withstand the stresses of the 1930s and failed.¹⁷ Johan Siemens, J. J. Siemens's father, had been critical of the *Waisenamt's* use of orphan's money to cover the bad debts of expansion-minded farmers. J.J. Siemens's more aggressive criticism of the ethics of this policy resulted in a falling out with the Bishop of the Bergthaler Church and coloured his view of the church and of the usefulness of church-based economic institutions.¹⁸ Siemens's reflections on this disagreement with Bishop David Schulz later in life suggest that it was the intransigence of the church leadership at the time that led Siemens to conclude that the church was incapable of providing leadership in the economic realm. In a letter responding to a student's questions for a research project, Siemens maintains that "the experiences of *Waisenamt*[...] its mismanagement due to lack of understanding and the spiritual weakness of the Churches with their conventional forms, shook the faith of many of us in the ability of our Church Leadership."¹⁹ Although his experience with the leadership of the church respecting the *Waisanamt* failure led Siemens to seek other solutions, he never completely gave up on the church as a powerful vehicle for motivating individuals in the community to improve their lot.

The experiences of the depression and the failure of key economic institutions of Mennonite community life persuaded Siemens that modernization of West Reserve Mennonite society was sorely needed and the church was holding back the necessary changes. While Siemens was critical of the way the Mennonite church mutual aid structures had functioned during the depression, his vision did not include a return to some past ideal. Siemens maintained that "the past could serve us as a source of experience but should never be the pattern for imitation lest it hinder progress, conflict with modern ideas in various fields of human endeavor, make men hesitant and undecided and take away their drive and vision for future development."²⁰ Siemens's vision for that future development replaced church-led mutual aid with co-operative and secular organizations.

The second flaw Siemens saw in Mennonite responses to the depression was the failure of the capitalist system that had come to dominate Mennonite economic life. In an editorial on co-operation in a 1936 issue of the *Rhineland Agricultural Society's Quarterly* Siemens suggested to his readers "that our old system, the competitive and capitalistic system of doing business... [has] not measured up to the ideal of the common good for all." He argued that the public was being taken advantage of by "practices that are [neither] equitable nor moral." More widely read than most of his fellow co-op members, Siemens pointed to the findings of the federal Royal Commission on Price Spreads to bolster his arguments. The Commission, headed by H.H. Stevens, was formed in 1935 in response to accusations of price fixing, poor working conditions and low wages in Canadian industry. The great interest in the Price Spreads Commission hearings resulted in recommendations to regulate industry and increase the involvement of the government in the economy. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett responded with his version of a 'New Deal' that he outlined to the Canadian people in a series of broadcasts in 1936. Although Stevens had been more inclined to conclude that the Depression was not caused by the failure of the system of capitalism, but rather that "a few big capitalists had failed the system,"²¹ J.J. Siemens was more inclined to lay the blame squarely at the feet of the system. At this stage of Siemens's thinking he was not inclined to look to the government for solving the problems of the Depression. He claimed, rather, that "the public has been taken advantage of and our governments, both federal and provincial have been cheated out of their dues." The solution Siemens suggested was based on establishing "a system of supplying our wants co-operatively, ...the earnings thus accruing from the transaction" could be returned "back to the consumer or producer who... made the transaction possible."²²

After his election to the Presidency of the Rhineland Consumers Co-op, Siemens immersed himself in the principles and theories of co-operation and became a forceful and eloquent publicist for the Rochdale principles, co-op values and institutions.²³ The critique of capitalism remained with Siemens even when post-World War II prosperity threatened to erase the painful memories of the Depression. Observations of California's postwar society while on a trip to the United States, gave Siemens pause for reflection on the effect of capitalism on society. Siemens saw life in Long Beach as "so high strung and artificial and capitalistic and lack[ing in] community spirit and fellowship."²⁴

Henry Dyck argues that Siemens's approach to co-operation embraced both pragmatic and utopian threads in co-operative philosophy. The utopian co-operators "believed that co-operation in conjunction with similar religious and political reform movements could change society."²⁵ Pragmatic co-operators, on the other hand, viewed co-operation as a way of correcting the system, protecting the rights of farmers and workers rather than changing the system. Dyck portrays Siemens as essentially a pragmatic co-operator with utopian influences in his thought deriving from his association with utopian co-

operative thought espoused by such leaders of Manitoba and Canadian Co-operative organizations as W.H. Popple and George Keen.²⁶

J.J. Siemens was driven by a utopian outlook, while at the same time he was able to devise practical co-operative projects. His extensive reading exposed him to the language of utopian co-operators and he increasingly used language that evoked images of a better life ahead. In his letters written in confidence to his partner D.K. Friesen, the utopian ideas were especially apparent. Commenting on his speaking tour of B.C. co-ops, Siemens assured Friesen that "naturally in my talks Philosophy and service to mankind, character development come in for a great deal of emphasis. 'Co-operation as a Way of Life' in some spots here, more especially among Mennonites, is missing completely."²⁷ In another letter, Siemens reflected on Co-op Vegetable Oils and concluded that "we have started something wonderful, in getting co-operative minded people to think in terms of community and brotherhood. We have the finest community I have so far seen, and this must have our further development aid in every way and shape possible."²⁸ Siemens's contemporaries were well aware of the utopian threads in his thought. The pastor who delivered the eulogy at his funeral believed that Siemens "with the faith of the idealist that he was, ... believed that betterment, once having taken root, would spread to others...."²⁹ A document prepared for the establishment of a scholarship at Altona's high school to commemorate Siemens's community development achievements claimed that Siemens promised that with "united co-operative action, they could transform their community from one that was forever competing against itself and in perpetual dependency, to one that could work its way to self-determination, self-reliance and a brighter future."³⁰

Alongside these utopian ideals, Siemens was able to work practically at devising successful co-op organizations. He was described as an effective organizer, a good manager and, with the possible exception of his vision for co-op education in Southern Manitoba, his efforts resulted in successful co-op enterprises.³¹ Siemens was practical and never underestimated the importance of tangible returns in the form of dividends and reduced costs to co-op members.

The pragmatic, or liberal-pragmatic, thread in co-operative thought has sometimes been labeled as 'voluntaristic.' This 'voluntaristic' thread in co-operative thought "referred to the various initiatives of farmers and workers in producers' associations and trade unions to exert some degree of control over their economic circumstances."³² Ian Macpherson suggests that the co-op movement of the 1930s was dominated by liberal-pragmatic co-operators who "expected limited, definite benefits from their co-operative associations; they were not convinced that co-operative ideology would become the ethos for a new, more just society."³³ The utopian and pragmatic themes coexisted in Siemens's thought and many of his local supporters ignored the utopian and were attracted to the practical benefits of co-operation. For opponents, however, it was the utopian overtones in Siemens speeches that threatened their confidence in the pillars of faith and tradition.³⁴

Although originally Siemens's reasons for espousing co-operation were not built on political grounds, over time he was unable to separate his desire to establish co-operatives from partisan political activity. In 1940, Siemens confessed to federal Liberal M.P. Howard Winkler that statements he had made earlier about having no political ambitions had ceased to be true. Siemens was enthusiastic about the potential he saw in the extension of Manitoba Premier John Bracken's wartime coalition government in late 1940. The addition of the Conservatives and the CCF to the governing Liberal-Progressive coalition appeared to make good Bracken's contention that "in small communities such as Manitoba, coalition governments could represent all interest groups."³⁵ Siemens mused confidentially to his friend Howard Winkler that "[s]ince Manitoba has adopted the plan of Government by Co-operation between the different parties I have begun to wonder if perhaps on such a basis I could fit in and serve my province and Morden-Rhineland."³⁶ It is unclear from Siemens's letter under which banner he contemplated running. Although passionately interested in politics by this time, Siemens still adhered to the principle of political neutrality, one of the Rochdale principles of co-operation. From Howard Winkler's response it appears that Siemens contemplated running on some kind of co-operative ticket, possibly as an independent. Winkler knew his co-operatively minded friend well, and after assuring him that he would be a welcome representative under any banner, Winkler suggested that Siemens should separate his co-operative principles from his political aspirations because "co-operation will prove to be the safety valve in our system of business and finance, and I would hate to see it drawn to a political union which might not succeed."³⁷

Siemens apparently reconsidered his political ambitions, but the connection of his co-op ideals to politics intensified. Siemens's wide reading included socialist materials and when his daughter attended Bethel College in Kansas he provided her with a subscription to *The Manitoba Commonwealth*, a C.C.F. paper so that she could study "Socialist ideas and propaganda."³⁸ After the euphoria of winning the Second World War subsided and the Cold War descended, Siemens's co-op ideas became more and more suspect in the eyes of some of his fellow Mennonites. While on a Co-op tour to Europe, Siemens wrote a letter to his C.V.O. partner D.K. Friesen in which he stressed the value of his exposure to other co-operators and mentioned particularly how he had acquired new ammunition to defend himself against two critics.³⁹ The two apparently were fellow C.V.O. Board members who thought he was moving too fast and was too left in his views.⁴⁰ His report to Friesen, however, emphasized a moderate political philosophy. When reporting to Friesen on a response he had been asked to give to an after dinner speaker at a banquet he attended, Siemens wrote: "I told them that we in America and Canada had come to Sweden to learn about how to build that 'Middle Way' and extend it until it would encircle the whole world in good fellowship and Brotherhood. That we believed civilization could only be saved by understanding and co-operation." Later in the letter he

assured Friesen that “[y]es, the trip has been wonderfully educational and instructive and if our community wants to we can help to build a ‘Middle Way’ in Manitoba, that will shape the destiny of not only Mennonites but everyone as well.”⁴¹ In the atmosphere of the Cold War attitudes favouring co-operation were easily branded as being Communist and, in spite of his vision of a ‘middle way’, Siemens’s enthusiasm earned him the reputation of being the greatest Communist of them all. Some observers, however, connected Siemens’s increasingly socialist views with the problems he was having with the church. H. J. Gerbrandt seems to believe that the more difficulties and opposition Siemens faced from the church, the more left his views became.⁴² The 1958 federal election saw J.J. Siemens finally declare himself publicly as a C.C.F. candidate. Although the time of his local community building activities had been waning, his candidacy resolved the attraction he had for partisan politics with his community and co-operative sense that people working together should be able to help themselves.

The relationship of Siemens and the church was less public but more controversial than his co-op activities. Siemens was baptized into the Bergthaler Church in 1922 at the age of 26. Although he never officially withdrew his Mennonite membership, by the end of his life he had become a Unitarian. Siemens’s relationship with the church was marked by controversy, particularly his relationship to the church leadership in the person of Bishop David Schulz. Although Siemens clearly disagreed with Schulz on approaches to education, social issues, and economic development, it is much harder to determine his thoughts about personal faith.

One of the most revealing of his writings on the subject is found in a letter to his daughter Viola, then a student at Bethel College in Kansas. The letter responds to his daughter’s question about baptism and was written in January 1945 when Siemens was 49 years old and at the mid-point of his public life.

The matter of being baptized is a very personal experience, and again should mean much more than being inducted into a church. I am glad that the Christian influences under which you are, appear to be genuine. This will greatly help you, I am sure, to reach the proper decision. The *Faith* that one’s sins are forgiven, and that Christ died on the Cross, for all our sins, that this Faith came by the Grace of God, a gift to each and everyone who wants to ask for it and accept it, is most beautiful, but has given me and many others a great deal of concern, because of the absences of ideal conditions and influences, as well as the result of inadequate Christian instruction and experiences. However it is true, and from my own experience the only way to obtain peace of mind and soul. And when one accepts this and walks in *His* footsteps you also accept all that goes with it, sacrifice and crucifixion which becomes then victory and not death or tragedy. So, go ahead and ask for such a Faith that will forever hold you securely on the right path. Be honest with yourself and others, live virtuously and cleanly in your thoughts and in your association with others and you will be happy and make mother and me most happy and proud.⁴³

The gentle counsel given to his 22-year-old daughter suggests both a private evangelical faith and a developing disillusionment with the church. The completion of his dream of an oilseed plant a few years later—after many efforts and battles—still left Siemens longing for a unity of church and co-operative efforts. In his letter to Viola on the occasion of the opening of C.V.O., Siemens admits that he “would love to have a Minister present who could give the opening a Religious flavor, bring in the fact that we are pacifists and anxious and desirous of making our contributions of life giving, life preserving, love for our fellow man, constructing and constructive and co-operative.” The gulf between him and the church leadership, however, was too large and he could not “think of anyone here I could go to who would do it in an understanding way. We want unity in our Religious-Economic and Social life. We want progress that moves forward in a unifying manner, all inclusive of a whole life, a oneness of a Kingdom of God on Earth character.[sic]” Siemens settled for J. Winfield Fretz, a Mennonite from the United States, later friend of Siemens, and ardent supporter of rural development and mutual aid organizations, but a person who Siemens felt could “give it the spiritual flavor the occasion deserves.”⁴⁴

The wholeness and unity sought by Siemens was reminiscent of the Social Gospel Movement of the pre-World War II era. Siemens, like the Social Gospellers, increasingly emphasized social action over the theological aspects of faith. Richard Allen concludes a study of the Social Gospel movement with the suggestion that the “social gospel’s heavy emphasis on the immanence of divinity in the social process, for better or for worse, encouraged the development of a secular society, and at the same time imparted, at least for a time, a sense of meaning to that development that was essentially religious.”⁴⁵

In the next ten years the difficult battles with opponents of the co-ops, the provincial government, and the church made Siemens even more skeptical of the church and more inclined to challenge the faith he had grown up with. In a 1951 letter to a student who had asked for help on an essay Siemens was much more critical and bitter about his church experiences. Referring to the problems of the *Waisenamt* he attributed the institution’s failure “to lack of understanding and the spiritual weakness of the Church with its conventional forms.” By this time Siemens was well on the way to substituting co-operative ideals for those espoused in the churches. Comparing the two he asserted that “[w]e have our basis of unity not along Church lines but on the fact that we are Mennonites belonging to an economic unit. I have heard it said by our members that we are more united as Co-operators than our Churches are united spiritually.” Acknowledging that he had lost his objectivity, Siemens concluded that “I have had so much to do with it that what I do is bound to be slanted in favor of the Co-operatives and critically against the church which is not fair, but twenty-one years of struggle leaves a mark and I have a number of scars that will remain but do not hurt anymore.”⁴⁶ The bitterness that Siemens felt towards the conventional church was instrumental in his gradual affinity for Unitarianism.

It is unclear when and exactly how Siemens became connected with the Unitarian church, but likely he was attracted to it more by the philosophy he shared with many of its members than by its particular doctrines. Becoming a Unitarian also coincided with Siemens's move to Winnipeg in the early 1950s where he enjoyed the cultural and intellectual environment of the city and the church.⁴⁷ Phillip Petursson, the Unitarian pastor who delivered the eulogy at his funeral, suggested in his notes that Siemens "valued his own independent judgment! He demanded proof rather than blind faith or supposition. That was—in large measure—the reason why he became a member of this church, a valued member, for here we encourage these things—alike in the practice of our faith as in other things! We enjoyed the association with him, and I believe, he with us."⁴⁸

In spite of his increasing bitterness towards the Mennonite church as it was being molded by Bishop Schulz, Siemens continued to hope for an awakening in the former's view of the church's mission. When a small group of Bergthaler Church members that included his friend Frank H. Epp started the Altona Mennonite Church, Siemens attended whenever he was in the Altona area.⁴⁹ Menno Klassen, a follower of Siemens in his youth, summed up Siemens's relationship with the Mennonite church with the thought that the church's God was too small for J.J. Siemens.⁵⁰

While J.J. Siemens's co-operative philosophy was part of his public life, his thoughts about the responsibilities of the individual in time of war are less well known. Siemens was an avowed pacifist and here allusions to James S. Woodsworth are more compelling than allusions to Johann Cornies. David Schroeder described Siemens's thought as "liberal theology undergirding a very strong pacifist position."⁵¹ J.J. Siemens worked tirelessly during the war to assist young men in working through the theological and philosophical reasons for a pacifist position. In contrast, his young co-workers later described the approach of the church as lacking any program—as "staleated."⁵² Siemens worked hard to provide more meaningful work and educational resources for C.O.'s in camps and in other forms of alternative service. Although other aspects of his Mennonite orthodoxy suffered, his view of participation in war never wavered.

Many of Siemens's letters to Howard Winkler during the war years focused on the problems of the government's C.O. policies and the response of the Mennonite church leaders to them. In Siemens's view the churches were preoccupied with keeping Mennonite young men out of the army and were concerned far too little with their contributions as citizens. Siemens complained about the useless work the young men had to do. To him it seemed the church was content to send their young men to the forest to cut ski trails, walk the superintendent's dog, read the Bible and sing.⁵³

The Mennonite response to World War II's challenge to their pacifism split along fault lines that coincided with the time of immigration of various groups. David Fransen points out that the immigrants of the 1920s were ready to accept medical corps service as an alternative while the Kanadier groups such as David

Schulz's Bergthaler Church remained determined to press for absolute exemption. Fransen argues that "Kanadier leaders, aware of the increasing cultural assimilation among their youth, knew that unless their young men were granted complete exemption many would opt for the military."⁵⁴ When the government allowed three options for C.O.'s: non-combatant training, medical corps, and civilian labour service, the Kanadier groups insisted that their young men accept only the third option.⁵⁵ Although it is not clear what J.J. Siemens thought of the three options, he clearly favoured using the C.O.'s in ways that would provide the state and the individual with the greatest benefits. He was displeased with the church's reticence in working together with him to achieve this result.

Siemens believed that the time spent in alternative service should be used for useful work and education, making a contribution to the nation both during the war and long after. Siemens's frustration at his inability to persuade the church of this approach forced him to redouble his efforts to gain support from the government as represented by Howard Winkler. In a letter to Winkler, Siemens lamented the lack of support from the church for his educational efforts among Mennonite young men and offered his view of what could happen if Winkler prevailed upon the church leaders to support his educational efforts.

I believe that if you could prevail upon them, at this time, point out the importance of this work to them and especially to our young people, they might have a change of heart, and come home and lend us their moral support. If that could happen we would have hundreds of young men and women going in for specialized training of a constructive nature; we would thereby be enabled to give the courses in Citizenship, Agriculture, Home Economics, Business, Co-operation etc. to our people. This would be the leaven which would soon be instrumental in changing the whole picture. Our young people are ready for this; its the hindrances put in their way that are obstructing our progress. I am praying that this may be changed for the sake of our youth. It would be the means whereby we would be enabled to make our contributions as Mennonites toward the National Well Being and stability.

I am speaking to you in confidence, and trust that you will regard it as such. Use your own judgment in the matter; you appreciate our difficulties, I am sure, and you know that I have tried as best I know how, to raise our standard as citizens of Canada. I feel there is so much we *could* do that would be looked upon with favor by our Governments, if we could only obtain the GO SIGNAL from our Church Leaders. It seems to me that here is an opportunity that should be taken advantage of, and that is the reason I come to you again with my worries.⁵⁶

Siemens pursued his vision of what should be done about conscientious objectors in practical ways. He was instrumental in initiating the publication of what became a four volume pamphlet series entitled *Woher? Wohin? Mennoniten* that was used as material for the study groups he organized in the area. He used personal funds and the support of the Rhineland Agricultural Society to have Paul Schaefer, principal of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, write the series to educate young people on the reasons for and historical context of the Mennonite pacifist position.⁵⁷

At one point Siemens, Dr. C.W. Wiebe from Winkler and others attempted to strike a "Layman's Committee" to pursue economic, social and educational objectives with C.O.'s. The committee sought the blessing of both government and the church for their program for C.O.'s. One of the members suggested that the committee had thought that "it was time to come to the aid of our Bishops and Ministers in this difficult situation, ...not to become involved in the religious aspect of the problem but rather to help on a purely economical basis." When the committee appeared at a conference of church ministers deliberating the question of C.O.'s, Siemens was introduced as one "who had discovered on his travels that there were many good people who were not Mennonites. The more he had studied other people, however, the more he had come to love his own ethnic group." J.J. Siemens was reported as "advocating not a one-sided emphasis on the religious dimension, but [that] economic and other dimensions of life should also be emphasized." He concluded with a final thrust at the church's methods by suggesting that "[o]ur time requires different methods than those of a hundred years ago."⁵⁸ In a letter to a student in which he reflected on his involvement with C.O.'s during the war, Siemens saw his efforts as building character and the nation while the church's approach was stifling and restrictive.

When the war started we took on the job of defending our boys before the Draft Board, boys who believed in pacifism had our whole-hearted support and we set up a Committee to appear before the Judge with our boys. We supplied peace literature and held a great many meetings with the parents of these boys. We supplied Mennonite literature in the C.O. Camps and were instrumental in getting hundreds of boys out of these C.O. camps and placed on farms or in hospitals. Those were the days when our church inducted our boys into the C.O. camps and we put them out of camps on farms.⁵⁹

The religious thought of J.J. Siemens gradually migrated to a universalism that embodied much more than the limited vision he saw in the religious leadership. In a notebook where he kept notes for his speeches this is stated most clearly. Although undated, the context appears to be an address he delivered to visiting American co-operators shortly after the war. After introducing the Mennonites, Siemens stated that "We believe in Universalism—A sovereignty to be set up by God—the father of all Mankind. We believe that the time is approaching where nationalism will have to give way *not* to Internationalism but to Universalism—A Sovereign State—Where the Brotherhood of man will be possible."⁶⁰

Siemens's ideas of co-operation, pacifism, church and community development were unified by the thread of the potential of education. Siemens's thought was progressive and he placed a high value on education's ability to right the wrongs of society. Siemens believed that with proper education people would voluntarily make the needed changes to Mennonite society. While his daughter Viola was a student at Bethel, he frequently counseled her on the importance of education and its value for life. He was impressed with European co-op organizations and most of all with their educational programs. One of his reports

to D.K. Friesen concluded that “where the people have the facts and are kept up to date on local and international economics and political issues they will decide on the right course.”⁶¹ Siemens fought hard in the co-ops he had helped establish to set aside funds for popular education in co-operative principles. Alongside the Rhineland Agricultural Society he set up the Rhineland Agricultural Institute to make use of government extension personnel to teach the principles and techniques of diversified agriculture. Although less controversial, Siemens’s educational efforts proved difficult to implement. Diverting funds from the pragmatic revenue generating activities of the co-ops to educate people displayed the utopian side of Siemens’s co-op philosophy and proved much more difficult to sell.

Siemens also read widely himself and had a gift for translating the ideas and abstract philosophies he read about into concrete actions for Southern Manitoba Mennonites. He was particularly fond of writers who combined liberal religious theology with a social conscience and optimism about the potential for self-improvement. Harry Emerson Fosdick and E. Stanley Jones, both more liberal—and pacifist—preachers, were two of his favourite writers. Arthur E. Morgan’s *The Small Community, Foundation of Democratic Life* was an important foundation for his approach to community development. Morgan was a Unitarian and Siemens seemed to agree with his statement that “the church might be most significant and effective by acting as a sort of hormone, adding tone to the whole, instead of trying to be a nearly complete social organism in itself.”⁶² Siemens was also influenced by writers seeking to bridge the gap between the sacred and the secular as influenced by modern scientific discoveries. While on an automobile trip with the family to the United States, Siemens reported that he was reading *Human Destiny* by Pierre Lecomte du Noüy for the third time.⁶³ The book was an attempt to prove the validity of the Christian faith using the tools of modern science. The author was also a proponent of education as the only way to promote the evolution of human civilization. Du Noüy believed that “[t]he progress and happiness of the masses can only be obtained by an improvement of the individual, and this improvement can only be based on high and noble moral discipline, not only freely accepted but understood.”⁶⁴ Siemens combined du Noüy’s ideas about the potential for self-improvement through education with his co-operative idealism. He believed that education would lead to co-operation, a fairer economic system and the elimination of wars. He saw the conventional Mennonite church as a force that was holding back the enlightenment that education could bring. To a large extent Du Noüy’s statement that “the unanimity of individuals can only emerge from the identity of moral, spiritual, and intellectual instruction, and can alone furnish the concrete base on which to build a stable and permanent society,” sums up the universalist philosophy that came to dominate Siemens’s thinking.

The above description of J.J. Siemens’s thought presents us with an individual’s response to dramatic changes that came to the Mennonite West Reserve

due to the depression, the Second World War and the postwar changes in rural life. Siemens's thought presents us with a microcosm of the tensions that existed in West Reserve Mennonite culture and society. When confronted by the economic disaster of the depression, the resulting failure of their mutual economic institutions, the challenge of World War II and the changes in rural life thereafter, Mennonite culture was challenged to reexamine the sacred, the secular and the material. The Mennonites of the West Reserve were more pragmatic than Siemens. While they also deviated from the wishes of leaders like David Schulz in accepting co-operatives they largely retained their faith orientation in the context of the Mennonite church. Most West Reserve Mennonites accepted the economic advantages they saw in co-operatives but never believed in co-operation as an alternative philosophy to the faith of their fathers. Co-operatives, while successful in their own right, were eclipsed by the general prosperity of the postwar period and Siemens's economic version of the 'Brotherhood of Man' would not become the ideal for most of the Mennonite community.

For J.J. Siemens, the depression and failure of the church leadership in dealing with its consequences seemed to be the crisis that shaped his thought for the remainder of his active public life. Combining utopian and pragmatic approaches to co-operation, Siemens increasingly substituted co-operative ideals for the tenets of the church. Siemens largely abandoned the sacred in favour of the secular, although he retained a longing for a unity of the two. For much of his active life Siemens also denied the need for partisan politics and preferred to rely on the potential of co-operation and education. The struggle to bring to fruition his dream of an oilseed plant and the frustrations of persuading the community and the provincial government eventually dulled that dream and Siemens was drawn into partisan politics and like many other reformers found his home in the socialist C.C.F.

Notes

¹ J.J. Siemens, Letter to Viola Siemens, March 17, 1946, letters in the possession of Irene Stobbe, Canmore, Alberta, hereafter Stobbe Papers. This article is based on two collections of private papers that were made available to the author. Irene Stobbe, a daughter of J.J. Siemens provided a collection of letters that he wrote to her sister Viola in the 1940s while she was a student at Bethel College in Kansas. Ted K. Friesen made available correspondence between J.J. Siemens and his brother D.K. Friesen (hereafter D.K. Friesen Papers). A third valuable source was a collection of letters written by J.J. Siemens to Howard Winkler which form part of the Howard Winkler Papers at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (Howard Winkler Papers -Correspondence with J.J. Siemens, MG 14 B44 Box 11 File: Siemens, J.J. 1938-1943, hereafter Winkler Papers).

² E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona, Mb.: D.W. Friesen,

1955), 226–227.

³ Royden Loewen, “Rurality, ethnicity, and gender: patterns of cultural continuity during the “Great Disjuncture” in the R.M. of Hanover, 1945–1961,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 1993, 181.

⁴ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 429.

⁵ Ted Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939–1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 146.

⁶ Loewen, 163, 181.

⁷ See Hilda H. Hildebrand, “Mennonite Mutual Aid and the Concept of Social Welfare: A Case Study of the Bergthaler Waisenamt and the Co-operative Movement in the Rhineland Municipality,” (University of Manitoba, Masters of Social Work, 1989) and Henry Dyck, “Jacob John Siemens and the Co-operative Movement in Southern Manitoba 1929–1955,” (University of Manitoba, Masters of Arts, 1982).

⁸ Francis, 229. For details of Francis’ career, see Leo Driedger, “E.K. Francis’ Search for Utopia: A Tribute,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 13 (1995), 89–107.

⁹ Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920–1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1982), 363.

¹⁰ Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Altona: The Story of a Prairie Town* (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1982), 166 and Gerhard Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland: Volost & Municipality* (Altona: R.M. of Rhineland, 1984), 157–158.

¹¹ Regehr, 140.

¹² The most extensive account of early Siemens’s family history is in *Heinrichs of Halbstadt 1896–1993* (Rosenort, Mb.: Heinrichs History Book Committee, 1993), 107–114. See also Henry J. Siemens, et. al., eds., *The Story of Johan and Helena (Toews) Hiebert and Descendants* (n.p., 1983), 225–230 and an identical account in Henry J. Siemens, et. al., eds., *The Story of Jacob and Helena (Peters) Siemens and Descendants*, (n.p., 1983), 115–120.

¹³ Francis attributes the survey to the “Agricultural Association of Southern Manitoba.” Francis, 218.

¹⁴ Robert Meyers, *The Spirit of the Post Road: a story of self-help communities* (Altona: The Federation of Southern Manitoba Co-operatives, 1955), 12.

¹⁵ A more detailed analysis of the relationship of Siemens to the co-operative movement is in Dyck’s thesis. See note 7.

¹⁶ J.J. Siemens, “Sunflower Rebuilds Community,” *Mennonite Life* (July 1949), 28.

¹⁷ The most complete account of the Bergthaler *Waisenamt* is in Henry J. Gerbrandt, *Adventure in Faith* (Altona: D. W. Friesen, 1970), 280–286. See also Ens, 147 and Jake Peters, *The Waisenamt: A History of Mennonite Inheritance Custom*, Mennonite Village Museum Historical Series I (Steinbach: Mennonite Village Museum, 1985), 17–18.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the controversy see Hildebrand, 228, Epp-Tiessen, 167–168 and Dyck, 55–56. The Schulz-Siemens controversy from the point of view of a member of the extended Siemens family is in Hal Hoffman, “My Brother’s Keeper?,” *Heinrich’s Rundschau*, 2(1) (March 1996).

¹⁹ J.J. Siemens to Mary J. Loewen, March 29, 1951, Conrad Grebel Archives, XV-31.2, File: “1940-Siemens, J.J.”, copy at the MHC.

²⁰ Siemens, “Sunflower...,” 29–30.

²¹ John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922–1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 259.

²² J. J. Siemens, "Co-operation," *Rhineland Agricultural Society's Quarterly*, 6(3) December 1936, 18. Located in the Mennonite Heritage Centre (MHC) Periodicals Collection.

²³ The Rochdale principles were a basic set of rules put into practice by a group of consumer stores in Rochdale, England which formed the basis for many co-operatives in Canada. The rules embodied the principles of voluntarism, democratic control, service, and member ownership. See J.G. Craig, *Philosophy, Principles and Ideologies of Co-operatives: What are Their Implications for a Vision of the Future? Working Paper #1* (Saskatoon: The Co-operative College of Canada, 1982), 3–4.

²⁴ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, January 22, 1948 from Long Beach California, D.K. Friesen Papers.

²⁵ Dyck, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, December 19, 1947 from Sardis, B.C., D.K. Friesen Papers

²⁸ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, January 25, 1948 from El Centro, California, D.K. Friesen Papers.

²⁹ Philip Petursson, "Notes of the Eulogy for Jacob John Siemens," Icelandic Collection, University of Manitoba Archives, Elizabeth Dafoe Library. See also "Memorial Services Held," *Altona Echo*, July 1, 1963.

³⁰ Menno Klassen, "An Altona High School Graduation Scholarship Award to commemorate the life and work of the late Mr. Jake J. Siemens & Mrs. Marie (Heinrichs) Siemens of Altona", personal papers in the possession of Menno Klassen.

³¹ Died Reimer, Interview, July 1, 1998. Siemens's vision for a Co-op College was realized in Saskatchewan with the establishment of the Co-Operative Institute in Saskatoon in 1955. See also Henry Dyck, 144.

³² Allen Mills identifies four kinds of co-operation in J.S. Woodsworth's thought. One of these he labels as 'voluntaristic'. See Allen Mills, *Fools for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 70.

³³ Ian Macpherson, *Each for All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900–1945* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1979), 188.

³⁴ Henry Dyck suggests that opposition to Siemens hinged on the utopian-pragmatic division in co-operative thought. Those who saw the utopian side of J.J. Siemens as dominant tended to be opponents. Dyck, 58–60.

³⁵ G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 401.

³⁶ J.J. Siemens to Howard Winkler, November 21, 1940, Winkler Papers.

³⁷ Howard Winkler to J.J. Siemens, November 25, 1940, Winkler Papers.

³⁸ J.J. Siemens to Viola, August 13, 1944, Stobbe Papers.

³⁹ The two mentioned in the letter are Jac Hooge and Peter Brown.

⁴⁰ Died Reimer, Interview, July 1, 1998.

⁴¹ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, July 17, 1947 from the Central Hotel, Stockholm, Sweden, D.K. Friesen Papers.

⁴² Henry J. Gerbrandt, Interview, August, 1997.

⁴³ J.J. Siemens to Viola, January 14, 1945, Stobbe Papers. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴ J.J. Siemens to Viola, March 17, 1946, Stobbe Papers.

⁴⁵ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914–28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 356.

⁴⁶ J.J. Siemens to Mary J. Loewen, March 29, 1951.

⁴⁷ Raymond Siemens, Interview, July 23, 1997.

⁴⁸ Petursson, "Notes...".

⁴⁹ Ted K. Friesen, Interview, October 14, 1997. See also the description of the beginnings of the Altona Mennonite Church in Epp-Tiessen, *Altona...*, 342-344.

⁵⁰ Menno Klassen, Interview, September 3, 1997.

⁵¹ David Schroeder, Transcribed interview with Frank H. Epp, Saturday, April 1, 1972, p. 14, in Conrad Grebel Archives, XV-31.2, File: "1930-Siemens, J.J.", copy at the MHC.

⁵² Died Reimer, Interview, July 1, 1998.

⁵³ *Ibid.* See also J.J. Siemens to H. Winkler, March 5, 1943, Winkler Papers.

⁵⁴ David W. Fransen, "Canadian Mennonites and Conscientious Objection in World War II," (University of Waterloo, thesis, 1977), 58.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁶ J.J. Siemens to H. Winkler, February 13, 1940, Winkler Papers. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁷ Died Reimer, Interview, July 1, 1998. The 4 pamphlets entitled: *Woher? Wohin? Mennoniten* were published by the Rhineland Agricultural Society, the Mennonite Agricultural Advisory Committee and the *Mennonitischen Historischen Vereins*. They were used for many years as Mennonite history texts and were reprinted in the 1970s by MCC for the benefit of Latin and South American readers.

⁵⁸ "Minutes of a Meeting of the Mennonite Churches in Western Canada, September 29, 1943," MHC, XX-102, Vol. 1132, Ed Klassen -Co-op Papers.

⁵⁹ J.J. Siemens to Mary J. Loewen, March 29, 1951.

⁶⁰ J.J. Siemens, Notebook in the possession of Raymond Siemens. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, August 5, 1947 from New York, D.K. Friesen Papers.

⁶² Arthur E. Morgan, *The Small Community: Foundation of Democratic Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), xi and 267.

⁶³ J.J. Siemens to D.K. Friesen, December 30, 1947 from Portland, Oregon, D.K. Friesen Papers.

⁶⁴ Pierre Lecomte du Noüy, *Human Destiny* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), 207.