

Conflict and the Telling of North American Mennonite History

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Mennonites take unseemly pride in humbly referring to themselves as “The Quiet in the Land.” Ironically, however, their history has been marked by nearly continuous internal disquiet and contention over cultural practices and religious ideas and values. Where does all this conflict come from and what are its consequences? How does it happen that such peaceable people have such a stormy history? Much of what follows is based on earlier research (e.g., Kniss 1997) in which I explored the contexts, causes and consequences of all this disquiet. In this short essay, I will offer in rather broad, general terms several ideas regarding the historiography of Mennonite conflict. Admittedly, these broad ideas are based on a more narrow study of conflicts in only one Mennonite branch, and only in the U.S. since the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, but I offer them for consideration regarding their more general applicability. Fully supporting these theses would no doubt require more space than that allotted here.

Historiographic Assumptions and Foundational Questions

One can broadly characterize previous historiographic and sociological approaches to understanding the American Mennonite experience by noting that both historians and sociologists who tell the Mennonite story have, in general, held at least two foundational assumptions in common. One is that there is a “Mennonite essence,” an essential core of values, beliefs, and practices that has been preserved more or less intact since the sixteenth century. A second, related assumption is that Mennonites have preserved this essential core over against the mainstream values of the larger Christian church and secular world. I will refer to these as the “essentialist” and “preservationist” historiographic assumptions.

These two fundamental notions led to two central research questions in much of the twentieth century scholarship on North American Mennonites. First, how can we best describe the Mennonite essence

in contrast to other religious and social groups? Secondly, how have Mennonites achieved boundary maintenance over against the outside world? The first has been most thoroughly explored by historians and theologians, and the second has engaged the attention of the first generation of Mennonite sociologists.

With regard to the first question, certainly H. S. Bender's well-known formulation of the Anabaptist vision (Bender 1944) was an attempt to describe a transhistorical essence and his thesis did much to frame later scholarship, both historical and sociological. But even before Bender, this essentialist assumption was evident in historical accounts of North American Mennonites. Earlier historians such as John Horsch (1911, 1924) and C. Henry Smith (1941) offered opposing definitions of the Mennonite essence, to be sure, but they shared the essentialist project.

Much post-Bender historical scholarship joined the project, working at refinements of the essentialist account. Guy F. Hershberger, for example, focused particularly on nonresistance as the essence of Mennonite faith and life (Hershberger 1953). More recently, Theron Schlabach has taken the Bender/Hershberger formulations of the Anabaptist-Mennonite essence as foundational in his accounts of the influences of Pietism in the nineteenth century and later in the twentieth century mission movements (Schlabach 1980, 1988). Frank Epp and T.D. Regehr tell a more complicated story of Canadian Mennonite history, but one that follows a similar plot line (Epp 1974, 1982; Regehr 1996). And Beulah Stauffer Hostetler argues that the Schleithem Confession of 1527 functioned as a transhistorical "charter" for American Mennonites (at least those in the east), and that their encounters with larger Protestant movements were a mix of resistance and accommodation that ultimately preserved the core charter (Hostetler 1987).

Hostetler's insights also addressed the second key research question in Mennonite historiography -- how the Mennonite essence was preserved. If there is a transhistorical essence to Mennonite identity and experience, then one must explain how it survives the vicissitudes of historical and social change. This preservationist problem shaped the work of both historians and sociologists throughout the 20th century. Historians told stories of the North American encounters with modernity and assimilationist pressures, and sociologists drew on functionalist theory to show how Mennonite social structures and processes functioned to meet the needs of boundary maintenance.

John Ruth, in his history of the Franconia Conference, declares the preservationist project explicitly in the title of his work, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* (Ruth 1984). As noted above, Hostetler (1987) followed in Ruth's path, showing that, through the thick and thin of

change, resistance and accommodation, Mennonites preserved their core charter. Likewise, the Epp and Regehr volumes of Canadian Mennonite history chronicle the preservation of Mennonite identity in a context of Canadian multiculturalism (Epp 1974, 1982; Regehr 1996). If one wished to argue against my assertion of the centrality of the preservationist question, one might offer the *Mennonite Experience in America* series of volumes as counter-evidence. The Schlabach (1988) and Juhnke (1989) volumes in this series, in particular, give sophisticated accounts of Mennonites' accelerating Americanization and Protestantization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet even Schlabach and Juhnke treat assimilation processes as ironies and unwitting failures of a people whose primary goal is preservation.

Turning to sociological treatments, we find that preservation is a dominant theme here as well. Redekop, in *Mennonite Society* for example, defines Mennonites as "a social group united by a religious faith cohering in a religious community . . . which provides a 'boundary mechanism' for identity" (Redekop 1989, 89). His study then goes on to describe the institutions that preserve the basic identity, and analyzes stresses and changes as internal and external threats to the identity's boundaries. Fretz's (1989) study of Mennonites in Waterloo follows the same analytical logic. Driedger (1988), also focusing on Canadian Mennonites, offers a similar, if more dialectical, account of the interplay of resistance and accommodation around identity boundaries – a dialectic that ultimately produces continuity of identity. The survey-based study by Kaufman and Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, produces indexes of the boundary-defining characteristics of Anabaptism, and measures contemporary Mennonite deviations from those boundaries (Kaufman and Harder 1975).

These foundational assumptions and questions define the basic contours of Mennonite historiography through much of the twentieth century. Considering the most recent work, however, requires adding some nuance to my broad characterization. Recent historical accounts, probably influenced by the polygenesis thesis of Anabaptist origins, have paid more attention to internal diversity among Mennonites and to their relationships to broader social and historical contexts. This is especially true of scholars who take a social history approach. The awareness of diversity and context are readily apparent in the two previously cited comprehensive multi-volume series treating Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada. Royden Loewen's account of the *Kleine Gemeinde* in Canada and the U.S. is an exemplar of social history that gives a central role in the story to the impact of socio-historical context – in Loewen's case, the urbanizing, industrializing market economy (Loewen 1993). Ultimately, however, the punch line of his

account remains the preservation of *Kleine Gemeinde* identity in a new world.

Accounting for Conflict

Not surprisingly, the two prominent historiographic assumptions noted above have shaped the way historians and sociologists have accounted for conflict. To quote more than one author, conflict and schism is the *Täuferkrankheit*, the Anabaptist malady. If the Mennonite experience is characterized by attempts to preserve a core set of essential values, one of which is peace, then conflict is at best an embarrassment, at worst a pathology.

One historiographic strategy – and this is particularly prevalent in self-interested accounts such as congregational histories – is simply to ignore or trivialize conflict. In the course of my earlier research, I read numerous congregational histories where a major conflict or congregational schism would be covered by a brief reference to “difficult times” or “unfortunate personality conflicts.” But mainstream scholarly treatments, given the essentialist and preservationist assumptions, also lack the analytical and conceptual tools necessary for an adequate accounting of conflict.

C. Henry Smith, for example, in accounting for nineteenth century divisions, blames denominational structures that “permitted scattered congregations to develop certain slight differences which later presented points of dispute” (1941, 596). He goes on to say that “[s]everal divisions, too, were caused by the pure stubbornness of certain self-willed individuals of a quarrelsome disposition” (Smith 1941, 596). A few pages later, he suggests that the Oberholtzer division, certainly one of the most significant in North American Mennonite history, could have been avoided with “a little more tolerance on the one hand, and a bit more of patience on the other” (Smith 1941, 603).

More recent historical work has been considerably more sophisticated than this and more cognizant of the significance of conflict. But a similar apologetic, even embarrassed, tone persists. Hostetler gives a full chapter to the Oberholtzer schism, but introduces it by noting that, although conflict “has been a serious problem for Mennonites” (1987, 125), its significance has perhaps been exaggerated. Like Smith, she suggests that authority structures made Mennonites vulnerable to schism, and that the causes of schism “frequently appeared to be petty concerns relating to personality conflicts” (Hostetler 1987, 126). But she also notes that underlying issues often represented core “charter” concerns. A similar discomfort and ambivalence in treating the subject of conflict can be noted in most other recent examples of

seminal historical work. An admittedly unsystematic review of the thirty-six book-length Mennonite histories on my office shelf yielded only two with a reference to conflict in the index, and three others with a reference to schism.

Rethinking Assumptions and Questions

If Mennonite historiography is to take conflict more seriously, scholars will need to rethink the essentialist and preservationist assumptions. As an alternative, I propose two theses as worthy of further consideration for the telling of North American Mennonite history. They are theses that contradict what I take to be the prevailing assumptions of earlier work, and which generate some alternative research questions.

The first alternative historiographic thesis is that at the core of what it means to be Mennonite is not a transhistorical “essence” or consensus over values, beliefs, or practices. Rather, at the heart of the Mennonite experience in North America there are several dynamic tensions. I will discuss two of them here in more detail, in order to demonstrate some of the historiographic consequences of this first alternative thesis. One tension, around which I’ve organized my own research on Mennonite conflict, is between two ideological paradigms or impulses which, at least in the North American context, have produced frequent, if not continuous, conflict. Another tension is between congregational and episcopal forms of religious authority (See Kniss 1996, 1997).

With respect to ideological tensions, I have previously argued that the Mennonite moral order revolves around two key paradigms, “traditionalism” and “communalism.” These two paradigms, like magnetic poles, are often in tension but have existed together in Mennonite ideology, institutions, and cultural practices. By “traditionalism,” I mean a shared notion that the collective tradition, embodied particularly in scripture and ecclesiastical authority, holds sway over individual interests and desires. By “communalism”, I refer to the focus on collective projects of egalitarian community building, mutual aid, social justice, and the like, projects that focus on maximizing the public good rather than individual utility.

These two paradigms pull in different directions. With respect to Mennonites’ position in the world, traditionalism supports a sectarian, separatist stance, oriented toward social control, while communalism supports a more activist, progressive stance, oriented toward social engagement. In the context of North American political and religious cultures, traditionalism faces right while communalism has affinities

with the left. North American Mennonites have thus shown some ambivalence in their relationships with the broader culture. In fact, one can interpret Mennonite history as a kind of dance between two ideological partners, with first one leading, then the other.

For example, for the Mennonite Church (that is, the pre-merger “Old” Mennonites) in the U.S., the “Daniel Kauffman era” in the early twentieth century was a time when traditionalists captured church institutions and drew on ideas and resources of the cultural and political right (See Gross 1986). In the latter part of the century, communalists gained dominance of Mennonite institutions, and they looked left more often than right for external relationships and resources. There have also been periods when the two paradigms have not existed in such tension, but seem to have been held together much more closely. Harold S. Bender, editor of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and Orrie Miller, executive secretary of Mennonite Central Committee, cooperated in this respect for a few decades in the mid-twentieth century in the U.S.

A second dynamic tension involves struggle over the legitimacy of ecclesial authority. Ever since the late nineteenth century (and likely before) there has been an ongoing competition over whether legitimate authority resides primarily in the local “community of believers” or in the religious elite – what sociologists of religion call the distinction between congregational and episcopal authority. In the U.S., this tension became particularly acute during the early 1900s when mergers were occurring between Amish Mennonite conferences, which had a tradition of congregationalism, and Mennonite Church conferences, which had developed a system of powerful bishops. The competition between these two forms of authority influenced many of the conflicts throughout this period, but was particularly dominant in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The religious elite emerged from that period with the upper hand, but after about 1930 their authority declined as the authority of local communities increased.

We can identify trends and fluctuations in the salience of these various tensions over time. Perhaps the most important was the overall decline in the dominance of bishops and other religious elites, and the simultaneous increase in the legitimacy of local congregational authority, especially after the early 1930s. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, North American Mennonites have experienced periodic lay movements to limit the authority of religious hierarchs and expand the autonomy of congregations and lay people. The Young People’s Conferences and the so-called “Laymen’s Movement” of the 1920s among “Old” Mennonites in the U.S. are two examples. More recently and more successfully, the Concern Movement of the 1950s called for decentralized ecclesiastical authority. There seems to be a

correlation between the activity of such movements and the decline of the “strong bishop” authority structure. “Old” Mennonites in eastern Pennsylvania, for example, never experienced a strong lay movement and maintained their strong bishop pattern for much longer.

But the decline of centralized religious authority was not merely a matter of competition between lay people, congregations, and bishops. Parallel to the increasing congregationalism was the emergence of conference and denominational bureaucracies as significant centers of power. The dramatic expansion of Mennonite bureaucracies during the 1940s and 1950s opened positions for many more leaders (some of them lay people). Simultaneously, church colleges and seminaries were generating large numbers of qualified candidates for positions in church agencies and institutions. Organizationally, the expansion in formal agencies and programs meant that there were many more people making careers in Mennonite organizations. This made concentrated, centralized religious authority much harder to maintain.

The competition over legitimacy of authority had an impact on the ideological tensions I discussed earlier. The increasing congregationalism weakened the influence of traditionalism (since the religious elites were traditionalism’s primary defenders). At the same time, it increased the salience of communalism. The expansion of denominational agencies meant that ever more attention was being paid to Mennonite communal projects. Some, like Mennonite Mutual Aid, focused on internal projects; but in the middle decades of the twentieth century, there was a particularly dramatic growth in externally oriented communalism, with a rapid expansion of mission, social service, and international relief and development activities.

Flexible and Porous Boundaries

A second alternative historiographic thesis counters the earlier focus on boundary maintenance. That is, the boundaries between Mennonites and the external world are not firm, clearly-defined, and maintained, but are flexible, fluctuating, and porous. Influences flow back and forth across those boundaries, and have throughout Mennonites’ time in North America. This second thesis is related to the first. One cannot focus on the ideological tensions among Mennonites without noticing the impact of outside influences. The contending parties were themselves aware of these influences, as a rhetorical analysis of the debates quickly shows. In the late nineteenth century, John F. Funk unabashedly drew on his experiences in Chicago when arguing in support of the innovations he promoted. Much of the language he and his supporters used parallels the progressive optimism of that period

in the broader American political culture. And the Old Order schisms of the period frequently pointed explicitly to these influences when they justified their departures. Similar influences can be identified in more recent periods as well. Juhnke's volume in the *Mennonite Experience in America* series does this very well (Juhnke 1989). One external influence that may still be insufficiently analyzed is the impact of Mennonites' varying experiences with war in the twentieth century.

Identifying the influences flowing in the opposite direction (that is, the impact of Mennonites on their sociocultural environment) is more difficult, but not impossible. If we focus on specific characteristics of the environment, the case can be made for some important Mennonite influences on the larger world. Probably the best example in the North American case is government policy toward conscientious objectors to war. There are likely other areas of the social/cultural/political environment (for example, international development policies or criminal justice policies) where similar Mennonite influences could be found, even if not on so large a scale.

Conclusion

If the alternative historiographic theses I propose are plausible enough to merit further testing, there are several new research questions that need to be asked. For example, if (rather than consensus) conflict and tension are the essence of the Mennonite experience, then we need to view any institutionalized statement of religious or cultural consensus as the product of social conflict, the triumph of one party over another in gaining the ability to define Mennonite reality. We need to ask: Who were the parties to the conflict? What determined who won? What were the interests being pursued by the various parties? What were the consequences for the losers?

If the boundaries between Mennonites and the world are flexible, fluctuating and porous, then we need to pay more attention to how and when influences flow back and forth across communal boundaries. Rather than asking how Mennonites maintain boundaries, we should ask: Which Mennonite institutions are the most important channels of influence? How do these change over time? What are the most important sources of external influences, and what determines how much impact they will have? In earlier scholarship, both historians and sociologists tended to view such external influences as aberrations – anomalies to be explained or even apologized for – rather than the “normal” reality. Consequently, they developed no coherent account to help us understand them.

One promising venue for asking the new questions that need to be asked is the emergent Mennonite scholarly conversation with postmodern theory. Many of the essays in a recent edited volume directly address the questions I identified above (Biesecker-Mast and Biesecker-Mast 2000). Significantly, the Mennonite scholarship engaging postmodernism incorporates voices from disciplines other than history and sociology. A new historiography of conflict will be more complex, not only in the questions it raises, but in the disciplinary theories and methods it uses to address them.

Deciding how best to understand and tell the story of conflict among Mennonites in North America is not simply an esoteric intellectual debate. Our perceptions and conceptions have real consequences for the lives of Mennonite people and institutions. For example, although the recent Mennonite Church/General Conference Mennonite mergers represented a creative compromise between congregational and episcopal authority structures, this tension will likely continue manifesting itself, keeping the dust from settling too quickly on the mergers. Current conflicts over homosexuality are keeping the tensions alive. Viewing conflict and tension as normal and viewing statements of consensus with a hermeneutic of suspicion will have implications for how we tell the story of historical and contemporary conflicts. The stories of the past, told by historians, sociologists and others, can and should influence Mennonites' decisions and actions in the present and their goals for the future. Given their impact, it is important that we get the stories right.

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