

The Mennonite Identity Crisis

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Introduction

Although the word "identity" has been overworked in recent years, it is an old and reputable concept. The creation account begins with the "naming" of man, and after that of all animals. Naming is inherent in the formation of identity. Identity has to do with the essence, with the self-knowledge of authentic being. It applies equally to individuals, groups, societies and even nations. "When we wish to establish a person's identity, we ask what his name is and what station he occupies in his community."¹

Identity and identification, however, must be kept separate: identity refers to the nature of essence, while identification is the process of recognizing an identity, or indicating membership in a class or collectivity. Hence a student can identify a member of a species as *Homo Sapiens* while he can also identify himself as belonging to the Mormon faith. Erickson says, "Identity formation, finally, begins where the usefulness of identification ends."²

Anyone who questions whether Mennonites are facing an identity crisis, should be reminded of the fact that there are Mennonite groups now debating whether they are Mennonites or Christians; there are many "stalwart" Mennonite families who are leaving the Mennonite faith community.³ There are "Mennonites" who find themselves asking what is the "good" of being a Mennonite, and even the *Gospel Herald*, the bastion of solidarity and stability, recently published a series on "Ex-Mennos." This series seemed to have touched the core of Mennonite anxiety.

Further, there are also more scholarly statements and analyses of the issue of Mennonite identity, such as Paul Peachey's "Identity Crisis among American Mennonites" or Leo Driedger's "Fifty Years of Mennonite Identity in Winnipeg: A Sacred Canopy in a Changing Society," or Peter Pauls' "The Search for Identity: A Recurring Theme in Mennonite Poetry." Certainly Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and the *Blue Mountains of China*, among others of his writings, focus on the theme of identity. There are many other examples of the search for identity.⁴

The use of a metaphor can help us organize our thinking and assist in the communicating process. In this study, we shall use the metaphor of the traveler and the wayside fountain. The image of the traveler needing a drink of water has a long and noble past. It figures in Jesus' teaching of compassion (the woman at the well in John 4:7) as well as in romantic folklore (for example, the traveler at the inn). The metaphor will serve us by implying that the fountain from which one drinks sustains, strengthens, and even influences the person who drinks. At the risk of bad double punning, it derives and expands on the famous axiom Ludwig Feuerbach propounded — "Der Mensch ist was er isst" — to "Der Mensch ist was er trinkt."⁵

With the image of Mennonites as travelers, we shall take a look at the fountains from which they have drunk and evaluate the implications of it. The "Mennonite Traveler" image can be taken in a number of ways and all are relevant and appropriate: 1) The group migrations to various nations, lands and cultures; 2) the experience of individual Mennonites as they have "moved in, through, and out of the Mennonite tradition;" and 3) the historical experience of the Mennonite "faith community" as it has survived through historical developments and contexts.

I. The Emergence of the Great Tradition: The Original Identity

Although there is increasing debate, most Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars have accepted the idea that the early Anabaptist movement had at least an incipient identity, even if there were numerous variations. Even though the established church and the political powers may have included too many "marginals" in their designation of the "cursed Anabaptist," it is clear that there was a group of rather pronounced identity.

The nature and dynamics of social movements are still not understood, but the Anabaptists represent a social-religious movement, and it is becoming increasingly clear that it emerged in a confrontation of a number of opposing ideas. Among them were: Disagreements about the role of political power in ecclesiastical affairs; disagreements on the rights of the church to tax and otherwise oppress the peasantry; disagreements on the moral practice of the clergy and other potentates; disagreements on the nature of the structure and administration of sacraments and offices; disagreements on the interpretation of scriptures on a host of points, including the very important issue of pacifism, non-swearing of oaths and the like; and disagreement on the role of economics in the church.⁶

The battlelines were being drawn at a number of fronts, and in the ensuing ideological struggle, there was a great amount of shifting, sparring, jousting, retreating, yielding and counterattacking, but there was

some coherence to the movement which has managed to persist to the present, and from an operational definition perspective, it is possible to say that what has come down to us is what survived and thus is the essence of Anabaptist-Mennonitism. In the first days of the movement, spokesmen and leaders emerged who articulated the essence of the movement, and it is interesting to note that the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage has rejected very few of its early spokespersons in the formation of its self-understanding, except for those advocating violence.⁷

Robert Redfield has contributed a concept which I think will help us understand the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement. Redfield says that any group or society in its formative stages is informed by a system of ideas and beliefs which form a "world view" which makes sense for the group and motivates its life — the "great tradition."⁸ This "great tradition" is not held by all members of the group in the same intensity, but it provides the ethos for all. The "great tradition" is usually created and carried by the insightful and gifted people in a group, although formal training does not guarantee it. Thus in Greece there was the "great tradition" of the leading philosophies and systems, and in every other group there has been the "Golden Age" idea which refers to this fact.

Redfield suggests, however, that no group continues in the "great tradition" for a variety of reasons. Almost invariably the great tradition is weakened or corroded so that a "little tradition" emerges, which is a pale and corrupted version of the original "Great Tradition." Redfield suggests that the "little tradition" emerges as a member of the group in the ongoing process of life, trying to live out the vision, or encounter other ideas. Ernst Crous puts it succinctly: "Even though the early Anabaptists developed a tradition, in the degree to which they opened up to the surrounding culture, they were influenced by the enlightenment and liberalism, humanism and modernism in increasing measure."⁹ The important fact to remember is that there exists a "Great Tradition" in every group, and the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement is no exception.

Understanding the nature of the "Great Tradition" and how it emerged among Anabaptists has exercised countless scholars and lay people. We however, are interested in how the earlier identity, that is the "Great Tradition", began to change to the "little tradition" where doubts about the nature of the group and its meaning emerged. To this we now turn.

II. The Change of Identity: The Traveler and Many Fountains

A. The Fountain of Suffering — the Bitter Water.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite movement encountered very early opposition, rejection, persecution, and annihilation. There is increasing

evidence that many original Anabaptists recanted their newly-found faith and "adjusted" their beliefs in order to survive. Even some of the leading contributors to the "Great Tradition" such as Balthasar Hubmaier, David Joris, Melchior Hoffman and others recanted.¹⁰ It is true that opposition, rejection, persecution and annihilation entrenched the faith in many cases, but it is equally true that many followers of the early faith adapted to the pressures of the time rather than suffer loss of limb and life. This fact has not been fully studied because of its obvious threats to adherents of the group itself, and will probably be documented by outsiders, as indeed it is now being done by Stayer, Haas, Clasen, and others.¹¹

Only one illustration of the forsaking of identity at the Bitter Well of Suffering can be given, although many others could be adduced:

However, I know that God never forsakes me if I suffer for the sake of his word. I know full well that I have experienced with great pain the Enemy's temptations against you. May God forgive you and all the dear people who have falsely accused me before you. Many things done long ago I have now been charged with.¹²

However, because of physical sufferings and family pressures, Andres Keller, the speaker of these words, recanted in 1536.

It can be argued that the fountain of suffering has probably undermined the identity of Mennonites less than any other. In fact, if the *Martyrs Mirror* has served any purpose, it has promoted commitment to an Anabaptist Mennonite identity. But some loss of identity through drinking at the well of suffering did take place.

B. The Travelers at the Well of Pietism

The sweet water of pietism has probably influenced the identity among Anabaptists-Mennonites more than any other. It is difficult to prove this assertion scientifically, but the evidence of the influence of pietism is pervasive. Whether we are focussing on Alsace, Germany, Holland, Russia, Canada, or the United States, it is clear that pietism was a great influence. The classic study by Robert Friedmann provides copious data on the way pietism subtly entered the bloodstream of the Mennonite Traveler:

So the Pietist made peace with the world as it is, and in spite of his sincere intentions to achieve a real *Christlichkeit*, avoided or eliminated the friction and opposition which he would otherwise have had to face. Without doubt many Anabaptists ultimately followed this road . . . It was the easier and yet a "Christian way."¹³

It was but a short distance from the great stress on denial of self in obedience to Christ to a focus on inner peace and joy and *submission* to

the experience of joy in the spirit. It is apparent to Friedmann that Anabaptism had in fact a compatibility to pietism which made adaptation almost inevitable. It is clear that regeneration, which the Anabaptists stressed, *and* a strong stress on discipleship and obedience to Christ would need some type of emotional support, especially when the religious impulse tends to become institutionalized as it did in Russia. It is at this juncture that pietism could provide the emotional release and support needed when the tension between the new life and the inability to keep the "first love" of the Gospel alive in the face of institutionalization and tradition emerged.

There is much evidence that Mennonites drank deeply from the well of Pietism. Only a few instances shall be cited. I refer to the influence of Jung-Stilling on Mennonites in the nineteenth century, which is well documented in "Letters of Jung-Stilling to Jacob Gysbert Van der Smissen," edited by Doerksen and Lappe. Not only were Mennonites influenced by Pietism, but prominent Mennonites were close friends with leading pietists like Jung-Stilling.¹⁴ The influence of pietism on Mennonite identity has to be seen as a nurturant for contemporary movements such as Fundamentalism and the charismatic movement. Ernst Crous believes that the majority of modern Mennonites were influenced both by the Pietists, Baptists and Quakers of the seventeenth century and the revival movement of the nineteenth.¹⁵

C. The Fountains of Humanism

The Reformation and Anabaptism were deeply influenced by the humanistic tradition, which was prevalent at the time of the Reformation. The Anabaptist movement clearly reaped the benefits of humanist thinking in the larger intellectual environment even if only weak strands of humanism are evident in the Zürich circle itself. But the later Anabaptist adherents did not encounter humanism as directly, and as the Mennonites became increasingly isolated in the hinterland of Europe, the opportunity to drink at that fountain diminished.

But the humanistic element was never exorcized, nor was it clearly identified, so that the concern for human dignity, welfare and reverence for life, even though legalistically claimed to have come from the New Testament, had more than New Testament justification. The characteristic phenomenon of contemporary Mennonites serving with great distinction and creativity in government or other secular welfare and service agencies, indicates the need to recognize humanistic forces at work.

D. The Roadside Well of Nationalism

It seems odd to suggest that Mennonites have stopped at the well of nationalism, but such is the case. Several roads to the well have been

taken: the "commonwealth trail" by which the Mennonite society, left to itself to develop its own nature, found itself developing its own national character as in Russia or in the Chaco of Paraguay; the road of submission and quietism as the condition for acceptance and tolerance, as in Switzerland, France and Germany; the highway of affluence, whereby Mennonites have become conservative defenders of the nation in exchange for the freedom to become wealthy, as in Canada and the United States.

The nationalism of the commonwealth type developed among Mennonites only in Russia, Manitoba, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia.¹⁶ A principal requisite is almost total autonomy, and it was achieved to a startling extent in the countries mentioned. The nationalism due to the intolerance of the host country is a curious phenomenon, but nonetheless real. According to Séguy, the Mennonites of France managed to retain their beliefs relatively intact before the establishment of the Republic, but the *equality* espoused by the Revolution forced the Mennonites to accept the requirements of citizenship or emigrate.¹⁷

An example of more strident nationalism can be detected in both Switzerland and Germany after World War I. The acceptance of military service in France, Switzerland and Germany by World War II suggests that military service was accepted as legitimate and sovereignty of the nation was assumed. It is known that many Mennonites in the Third Reich openly supported Hitler. An editorial on Hitler's fiftieth birthday (1939) by Emil Haendiges, editor of the *Mennonitische Blätter*, is revealing, if not disconcerting. Mennonites in Canada and Paraguay have also manifested a nationalism which was uncharacteristic of their earlier Anabaptist tradition.¹⁸

But the form of nationalism which has crept into the blood of the largest number of Mennonites is *that* nationalism which was born of an appreciation for the benefits and wealth that the host countries, especially Canada and the United States, have provided them. There is generally a "super patriotism" evident on the part of oppressed immigrant groups as they settled in Canada or the United States. The Armenians from Turkey are such an example. But especially the Mennonites from Russia expressed this nationalism which arose out of a great appreciation they felt for having finally been given freedom, coupled with the promise and challenge of materialistic opportunities.

As is the case with wealthy people in general, the more successful Mennonites, economically speaking, have become increasingly protective of Canada or the United States and have supported, for example, the "love it or leave it" syndrome. The Kauffman-Harder study bears this contention out as indicated by the following statistics on attitudes toward social issues: "To the question, 'For the most part, people are poor

because they lack discipline and don't put forth the effort needed to rise above poverty,' 54% agreed."¹⁹

In some research I did several years ago of a random sample of business persons in Canada and the United States, most suggested that they were glad they were citizens of a land which gave them the freedom to live as they wanted to. My father, for example, never criticized the United States, and said that Mennonites should instead show by our hard work and obedience that we were happy to be in a free country. As a cynic, one might say, "How many of the Mennonite prayers thanking God that we live in a wonderful country where we are free to worship as we please," are really a camouflaged expression of happiness at being in a country where one could "make it" relatively easily and quickly?

Another index of nationalism may be the political participation evidenced among Mennonites, especially in office holding. Increasing research is available on the subject.²⁰ It is difficult to say exactly how the water from the well of nationalism has affected the Mennonite identity or whether in fact the nationalism of Mennonites is merely an expression of an earlier acculturation. But it is clear that the original Mennonite identity of being the "separated people of God" cannot prosper when the nation-state is accepted as determinative for life in the faith community.²¹

E. The Regenerating Waters of Fundamentalism

An adequate discussion would in this instance include the impact the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening had on Mennonites. Information on this is now coming to light, but I limit myself to the way Fundamentalism has influenced Mennonitism. The inroad of Fundamentalism in Mennonite faith communities is one of the most obvious processes that can be discussed.

The number of Mennonite men and women who have attended the various Fundamentalist Bible schools and colleges across Canada and the United States through the years has been remarkably large. One needs only to mention Prairie Bible Institute, Briarcrest Bible School, Winnipeg Bible College, Northwestern Bible College, Moody Bible Institute, Grace Bible Institute, Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Wheaton College, John Brown University, and Bob Jones University to recognize how great the traffic has been. The diet of Fundamentalism for a typical youth growing up in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, reads like a Who's Who of Fundamentalism. Bible camp with William B. Riley in Minneapolis, was an annual event. Revivals in the community featuring Oscar Lowry, Merv Roselle, Theodore Epp, Harry Rimmer and others were standard fare. And of course Charles E. Fuller and the Old Fashioned Revival Hour was a hallowed ritual in the community every Sunday afternoon.²²

There are many ways that Fundamentalism has affected the Men-

nonite identity, but a short analysis of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church might be instructive. The EMB Church emerged in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, and Henderson, Nebraska, as a protest against the secularization process of the larger Mennonite community. A recovery of the disciplined life, based on regeneration, as well as the recovery of the old teachings such as non-resistance and separation from the world was pronounced. In the resultant separation there were no other Mennonite siblings with whom nurturing fellowship could develop. In the vacuum the EMB members began to listen to other Christian voices.

Very quickly doubts began to be raised about the validity of the "traditional Mennonite" ways, and it was maintained that Mennonites worshipped their past rather than Christ. The coming of World War II became a crucial turning point, where those who opted for the traditional non-resistance position were accused of being more tradition bound than evangelical. "Did not the Baptists and other born again Christians serve in the army, and could one not be a better witness there than in a CO camp where most of the young men were not even believers!" Arguments like this were used to undermine the Mennonite peace position.

In the last few years, the EMB conference has been debating whether it can continue supporting the Mennonite Central Committee since the MCC is too "Social Gospel" oriented and not enough regeneration oriented. Beyond that, the EMB conference has been vigorously debating whether the Mennonite name and teachings are not a hindrance to evangelism and church growth. As a matter of fact, the conference is now officially debating whether it should drop the name Mennonite. The running debate in the *Gospel Tidings*, the official church organ, makes for fascinating reading in this regard.

Fundamentalism has been powerful, pervasive and subtle because of the fact that it is a trans-denominational movement which emphasizes the fact that "nominal" or a pseudo Christianity can emerge in any church body.²³ Hence the Mennonite faith community is not exempt. Further, Fundamentalism is motivated by a strong emphasis on "correct doctrine" which must replace false doctrine.²⁴ The stress is on the facts of the conversion experience and less on ethics and obedience to Christ's teachings. Thus, especially for marginal people in many non-mainline denominations, Fundamentalism has a great attraction, for it gives justification for forsaking an "ethnic church" and moving into the main stream of North American life.

Fundamentalism has crept into all Mennonite conferences, although Beulah Hostetler maintains that the Franconia Conference has remained aloof from it.²⁵ The so called "Old Mennonite Church" has had its own unique relationship to Fundamentalism.²⁶ For obvious reasons,

the Hutterites, Amish and Old Order Mennonites are less affected, although unmistakable signs are emerging there as well. The Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites have experienced the inroads of Fundamentalism in the last decade or so.

F. The Heady Water of the Fountain of Knowledge

The Mennonite experience with education and its influences is complex and intriguing. Almost from the beginning, Mennonites have operated educational institutions to socialize the young. To the Hutterites goes the honour of having begun the first formal schools for the training of the young. Leonard Gross says: "The Hutterites established their own schools soon after the movement began . . . In the Brotherhood *Reichenschaft* of 1542, Peter Riedemann described the nature of the Hutterian Schools, where children learned the meaning of *Gelassenheit* (the quality of yieldedness), a central Anabaptist teaching which defined in large part the Hutterite community."²⁷

In France, for example, the education of children took form in an informal way and developed such renown that local citizens in the regions requested that their children be allowed to attend their schools as well. Similar developments emerged among other wings of the Anabaptist movement. But the entire educational system remained very practical and minimal. There was no higher education until the early part of the nineteenth century in Russia, with the first secondary school being the Ohrloff School. In America, the first college was established by the immigrating Russian Mennonites, with the opening of Bethel College at Halstead, Kansas, in 1893.

But the establishment of post-secondary schools, including Bible schools and colleges, is not very relevant when analyzing the influences of higher education among Mennonites. For that one must look at the influence higher education had on those individual Mennonites who attended secular or non-Mennonite schools. Among Russian Mennonites the incidence was substantial and growing, although the leaders of the first period, such as Tobias Voth and Heinrich Heese, did not have much formal education. We do know that Heinrich Franz Sr., a prominent teacher in Russia, had studied at the Society School at Rodloff Hufen near Marienburg.

Among North American immigrants, we know that few Mennonites studied at secular institutions of higher learning before the turn of the nineteenth century. One of the pioneers of secular higher education was C. Henry Smith, whose autobiography provides a great amount of insight for the "Swiss Mennonite Branch." There were numerous people attending seminaries and Bible schools in the nineteenth century,

in Switzerland and Germany, and a smattering of students took degrees in science and philosophy at leading European universities. Almost without exception, however, these people either left the Mennonite faith community and joined a denomination where they could put their education to use, or they assumed passive roles in the community which downplayed their intellectual training.

The intellectual development of the Mennonite faith community has yet to be studied, but it is clear at least to this writer that there was little reciprocity of intellectual position, and that the Mennonites who received higher education accepted and assimilated ideas and beliefs which were not a part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite belief system. It is most probable that the fear of education, as expressed by Minister Elder Johann Harder in 1860, indicates the feelings of many at that time: "Woe unto those educational institutions and school teachers who in their efforts do not only restrict themselves solely to the knowledge and sciences of this world, but attempt to give to this knowledge and these sciences a direction which brings them into contradiction with the Word of God."²⁸ Education, especially higher education, was looked upon with suspicions which surely reflect not only the time-honoured fear of the unknown, but also the fear of what was very well known, namely that higher education could create dissidences with the "faith once delivered."

It is presumptuous to list definitively the influences which Mennonites accepted through higher education, but it would be less than reasonable to deny that they were influenced by all the intellectual currents they selectively became exposed to, including evangelical pietism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rationalism of the enlightenment, although thoroughly filtered and delayed. The theological currents of nineteenth century Europe, including the forces of liberalism, of twentieth century Fundamentalism and neo-Orthodoxy, as well as evangelicalism of recent decades have certainly been expressed in almost all Mennonite conferences and even congregations. Crous, in discussing the cooperating and unity of European Mennonites, says that when some people were agitating for the establishment of a European Mennonite "Predigerschule" in 1830, that the centrifugal forces were too great: "Es ergab sich vielmehr umgekehrt, dass der Einfluss fremder Universitäten, Predigerschulen, Missionsschulen, usw. das Eigene oft stark zurückdrängte und bei der Selbständigkeit der Einzelgemeinden der Einfluss von aussen sich in ihnen häufig örtlich verschieden auswirkte."²⁹

What would Mennonitism look like if Mennonite intellectual life had not been supplied by water from the prevailing waters mentioned above is a moot question. Our metaphor will probably not be strained to

the breaking point if we maintain that all intellectual life needs life-giving water, and that no social-cultural tradition is able to provide this totally on its own. The more important question, therefore, is "Which water did the Mennonites drink most deeply, and what impact did that have?"

III. The Great Tradition and the Little Tradition: A Great Ambivalence

Anabaptist-Mennonitism has persisted in the stream of history as an identifiable phenomenon. When I ask non-Mennonite students in my Mennonite Sociology class to define at the beginning of the class who they think the Mennonites are, typical answers as the following appear: "I feel the Mennonites are a minority group due to their strong extraordinary religious convictions and a group of extreme sociological interest due to the preservation of their own unique tradition and culture throughout history." Another said: "The Mennonites are a spiritually, culturally and traditionally close-knit group of people who are serious about a purpose for their life and wish to maintain an identity as separate from society."

Among members of the Mennonite community there is no less agreement that there is something identifiably "Mennonite" about the thousands of people who carry that label and who act in rather peculiar ways, at least to outsiders. All the forces that influenced the Mennonite Travelers mentioned above, served to make the Mennonite identity what it has become, and it is not the addition of any of the factors mentioned in themselves that have created the crisis. For as it is with individuals, so it is with groups — they are a part of all the people they have met. It is my view that Mennonites have continually responded to the changes which came to them from the outside, but that these *changes were slow enough to allow the Mennonite society to integrate them into the system.*

But the question of identity continues to surface in various ways. What is the nature of this identity crisis, and what relevance does it have for us? There are several answers which can be given to this question.

1. There is no identity crisis, rather there is only the experience of existence in a cultural/social context. All groups, whether large or small, religious or secular, with formal or informal membership have to continually wrestle with the nature of boundaries, the nature of membership in the group, the nature of the relationships with the outside and the purposes of the group, to mention only a few. "The Mennonite Identity Crisis" can thus be a symbolic way of referring to the self-conscious way in which Mennonites are becoming aware of themselves and the status they occupy. It is sociologically clear that when a group is relatively isolated the group identity question is not as pressing as when the boundaries of the

group are being "infiltrated" by increasing numbers of outsiders. Then the issue becomes serious.

With the "inroads" of mass communication such as television, mass interaction via missionary and service activities such as the MCC, and increasing geographical mobility via travel and change of residence, group boundaries and membership questions will intensify. So, Mennonites may not be facing an identity crisis as much as they are facing the need to intensify the search for group survival when the old boundary mechanisms, the old group memberships and the goals for the group existence become increasingly challenged by the "outside world."

2. The Crisis of Religious Movement versus Ethnic Church

Most Mennonites, regardless of the branch from which they come, or of the theological persuasion they champion, maintain that the crisis facing the Mennonite tradition is that of hopelessly mixing the evangelical faith aspects with the cultural forms which have developed around that faith. I think it can be said categorically that most objections to and alienation from "Mennonite identity" is the fact that Mennonitism is a faith system and a "way of life," and these two things must not be linked together. Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* portrays the conflict between the "ideal faith" and the community expression of it. And Pat Friesen can express in poetry the ambivalence of being part of a Mennonite community and its faith as follows:

I was at the funeral
all the brethren
my stiff-necked mennonites
carried the coffin
and sang
their amazing grace
made me weep for old days³⁰

Paul Peachey states the same issue as follows:

American Mennonites today are undergoing a deep crisis of identity. Thanks to the runaway pace of change in American life, the cultural and psychic substance of Mennonite solidarity is rapidly dissolving . . . Yet in the end Mennonitism itself was seduced by the same ethnic impulses that had constituted, though on a vaster scale, medieval Christendom.³¹

Without a doubt, the simultaneous pride in the Anabaptist-Mennonite belief system and the embarrassment at the "ethnic" and cultural trappings of that heritage has created a tension which is reaching the breaking point for many Mennonites. Many solve the tension by leaving the Mennonite church and community entirely. Others ignore the ethnic aspects and maintain they are "Anabaptists" but not Mennonites. Still others maintain there is no compatibility between the two, insisting that

religion is always expressed in cultural form and that each is dependent on the other.

This tension between the ethnic and religious dimension of Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition would be a genuine and serious crisis if it could be shown that a religious belief system must not be expressed in cultural form. But social science has assumed that religion is a cultural phenomenon, and the Christian faith says nothing about the relative moral value of "plooma moos" as over against apple pie. The Christian teaching does, however, put moral value on doing good to the neighbor and forgiving the one who hurts you.

The identity crisis involving the ethnic nature of Mennonitism is thus a spurious crisis and a false understanding of the issues. It is apparent that those Mennonites who are lamenting the ethnic elements of the Mennonite tradition are in reality protesting the way that subculture is inhibiting the religious tradition from becoming accommodated to the American narcissistic life style. Fundamentalism and evangelicalism are thus convenient conveyors of assimilation for "marginal" or non-mainline Christian groups into the popular easy civil religion. Hence the "ethnic problem" is the same, whether it be Mormons, Dutch Reformed, German Lutheran, or Ukrainian Catholic. Sloughing off the ethnic factor helps the members become members of the American majority, which is after all the most comfortable place to be.

The opposite conclusion which assumes that everything about an ethnic system is good can, however, not be taken either. It is not because one speaks to a neighbor in Low German rather than Lithuanian or Ukrainian that one is faithful, rather it is the issue of how the neighbor is treated, and that issue judges all ethnic and cultural forms and is a universal norm.

3. Cultural Lag and Mennonite Identity Crisis.

If there is an identity crisis among Mennonites — and it seems that there is one — it is not basically either of those mentioned above, but rather a crisis brought about by the fact that Mennonite faith has not been able to cope with the technological and social changes that have enveloped them. The metaphor of the fountains at which Mennonites drank indicated that there was a continual change and development of the Mennonite identity through the intellectual currents of the environing peoples. And in this sense the identity was in a constant state of flux and change.

But the rate of change does have something to do with the ability of a society or a group to retain its integration. It is my contention that the rate of change in the structure of the Mennonite community has increased so drastically that the faith elements have not been able to keep up with the social and technical dimensions of human life.

There is a considerable similarity between the Mennonite "faith community" and the Lengua and Chulupi Indians in the Chaco. Originally these societies were relatively integrated social systems, with religious elements well integrated with the social and economic. The coming of the Europeans and the technology they brought introduced such a drastic change that there has been a serious disintegration, and many individuals as well as communities have lost their hold on the past, have no will for the present, and do not know what the future means for them. For an anthropologist, it is easy to see such process in another group; it is much harder to see it in his own.

The Mennonite identity crisis can best be described as a loss of integration or connectedness between faith and its supporting community. The centrality of the congregation, the social and economic support of the village or rural community, the emotional and status strength of the family, the positive stability of agriculture, the dependability upon the soil and nature, the presence and stability of authority, and many more have suddenly been almost totally lost.

Suddenly Mennonites find themselves reflecting very closely what used to be the "world," divorce, lawsuits, bankruptcies, millionaires and paupers, dishonesty, political involvements, land development schemes, mass defections to main line and bizarre religious groups, and many others which could be listed tell us that an identity is being challenged.

When one analyzes a closely related family, one begins to see what is happening. A family left the northeast Montana Mennonite farming community during the depression to work in a big Public Works Project some hundred miles away. They moved because the dust bowl made the future appear hopeless. Relatives had helped financially as much as they thought they should, given the conditions. Within a short generation of 25 years, this family ended up totally disoriented and disorganized. An almost unbelievable story of pain, disruption, and woe could be told — a modern prodigal family parable.

The Mennonite identity crisis is the quandary members of any ethnic church faces as the faith system finds itself undercut by the loss of the geographic, occupational, social, agricultural and economic communities. There is no rural community to support the faith which was so intricately woven. My study of the Chulupi and Lengua convinced me of one cardinal fact — that you cannot change a group's technical, social and economic life without undercutting the religion which is integrated into that life or vice-versa.

Mennonite scholars and leaders have asked repeatedly whether Mennonites can survive in the city. Leo Driedger, for one, has tried to show that they can and are.³² He is probably right, but the question is not whether Mennonites can survive in the city. They certainly can, *if* the

Mennonite *Community* can be retained in the city. That is a different question to which the answer is not yet conclusive. Mennonite identity can not survive the loss of the supporting community, and in some urban areas the community is being supported as much by in-migration as by self-perpetuating institutions.

Why should Mennonites be facing an identity crisis more serious than say the Baptists? The answer is simple. Mennonites in enclavic communities retained a collective or communal orientation to knowledge, experience, and faith, and that orientation is finding increasing hard going in the modern individualistic age. Baptists or most other religious groups for that matter accept and embrace the individualistic ethic, which makes identity a matter of personal and narcissistic experience.

Conclusion

Mennonites have received refreshment at the wells of many other traditions and communities. These influences have helped to forge an identity which, though changing, was managed and integrated into a manner of life which supported the emerging belief system. The identity issue was always before the Mennonite community as it found its way, whether in the Juras of Switzerland, Alsace of France, Bavaria in Germany, Manitoba in Canada, or the Chaco in Paraguay.

But what has finally produced the identity issue of critical proportions is the sudden jet age speed with which changes in almost all areas of life have taken place. Culture shock has hit the Mennonites and the casualties may yet increase. It is possible, however, that "hard times" around the globe may weld us into a faith community once more and force us to rediscover the validity of our faith and the eternal principles it espouses, since Mennonites presume to follow Jesus directly and simply.

In Redfield's imagery, the Mennonite identity crisis consists of the fact that the great tradition (the central beliefs and values) of Anabaptism was absorbed by the little tradition as long as the changes were not too great nor came too fast. But today, the great tradition is being challenged and developed so rapidly that it is impossible for the little tradition — "the little tradition of the largely unreflective many" — to accept and apply the faith.

Notes

¹Erik H. Erikson, "Psychosocial Identity", *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, p. 61.

²*Ibid.*, "Identity, Youth and Crisis" (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 159.

³For an analysis of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, see Calvin Redekop, "The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 36 (September, 1981), No. 3.

⁴Paul Peachey, "Identity Crisis Among American Mennonites", *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (October, 1968); Leo Driedger, "Fifty Years of Mennonite Identity in Winnipeg: A Sacred Canopy in a Changing Laboratory," in Harry Loewen, ed., *Mennonite Images* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980); Peter Pauls, "The Search for Identity: A Recurring Theme in Mennonite Poetry," *Mennonite Images*; Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); *The Blue Mountains of China*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970).

⁵Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. xiv.

⁶There is a growing literature on the subject. Only several sources can be cited. Each one has an extensive bibliography: James M. Stayer, "The Anabaptists," in Steven Ozment, ed., *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982). This volume has a series of other articles dealing with the topic; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Umtrittenes Taufertum, 1525-1975* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975); *Ibid.*, *Die Täufer* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980); Marc Lienhard, *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

⁷James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1972).

⁸Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 67ff.

⁹Ernst Crous, "Mennonitentum und Pietismus," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (July/August, 1952), p. 279.

¹⁰Walter Klaassen, *Sixteenth Century Anabaptism* (Conrad Grebel College, 1982) contains a number of accounts of accused Anabaptists who recanted. Statistics on Anabaptists returning to the state church are discussed in C. P. Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972.)

¹¹See note 6 for bibliographies.

¹²Walter Klaassen (ed.), *Anabaptism in Outline. Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener/Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), p. 93.

¹³Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (Goshen, Indiana: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1949) p. 12.

¹⁴Victor G. Doerksen and Claus O. Lappe, "Letters of Jung-Stilling to Jacob Gysbert Van der Smissen," *Mennonite Images*, p. 98.

¹⁵Crous, p. 281.

¹⁶E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955); Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969).

¹⁷Jean Séaguy, *Les Assemblées Anabaptistes-Mennonites de France*, (Paris: Mouton, 1977).

¹⁸See John H. Redekop, "Mennonites and Politics in Canada and the United States," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (Vol. 1) 1983, for bibliography.

¹⁹J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975), p. 142.

²⁰See John H. Redekop, for references.

²¹One of the most extensive studies so far is James Juhnke's *A People of Two Kingdoms* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1975). For expressions of nationalism among Mennonite poets, see Heinrich Heese and Bernhard Harder in P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, 1978), pp. 702-705; 949; 958. See also Peter Klassen's poem "Mein Bekenntnis," in *Unter dem Nordlicht*, pp. 26-27.

²²This paragraph reflects the author's memories as a youth in Mt. Lake, Minnesota. Other communities could repeat the theme.

²³James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1981) p. 24.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵Beulah Hostetler, "A Century of Resistance to American Protestant Movements; Franconia Mennonite Conference, 1840-1940" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975).

²⁶See Theron Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1979). According to Schlabach, Old Mennonite Fundamentalism was the internal adaptation which dealt more with acculturation than theological changes.

32. ²⁷Leonard Gross, *The Golden Years of the Hutterites* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980), p.

²⁸Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia 1789-1910*, p. 715.

²⁹Crous, p. 284.

³⁰Peter Pauls, "The Search for Identity: A Recurring Theme in Mennonite Poetry," *Mennonite Images*, p. 252.

³¹Paul Peachey, p. 243, 249.

³²Leo Driedger has published an extensive series on Mennonites in the City. See the citation above, and the bibliography of his writings in "Sociology of Mennonites: State of the Art and Science," by Leo Driedger and Calvin Redekop, in *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.